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Coping Behaviors and Psychological Difficulties: A case study of Middle School Students in Vietnam

Baş Çıkma Davranışları ve Psikolojik Zorluklar: Vietnam'daki Ortaokul Öğrencileri Üzerine Bir Vaka Çalışması

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Abstract:

This research explored coping behaviors and psychological difficulties in Vietnamese middle school students and determined relationship between these variables. A sample population of 582 early adolescents from four secondary schools in Vietnam who aged from 11 to 14 voluntarily participated in the study. Measurements included a brief cope behaviors and a self-report questionnaire employing a Likert scale including psychological difficulties. The research results revealed that students in Vietnam suffered from considerable levels of psychological difficulties. The specific coping behaviors accounted for 27.8 percent of variance in psychological difficulties, in which use of instrumental support, self-distraction, denial, behavioral disengagement, self-blame, and acceptance were significantly predicted having increased students' psychological difficulties. Meanwhile, active coping and use of instrumental support contributed to predicting the decrease in students' psychological difficulties. These results are interpreted within the context of what educators in Vietnam could have psychological interventions for students with psychological difficulties in focusing on eliminating maladaptive coping behaviors and enhancing active coping behaviors.

Keywords: Coping behaviors, Psychological difficulties, Middle school students

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Öz:

Bu araştırma Vietnamlı ortaokul öğrencilerinde başa çıkma davranışlarını ve yaşadıkları psikolojik zorlukları araştırmış ve bu değişkenler arasındaki ilişkiyi belirlemiştir. Vietnam'daki dört ortaokuldan yaşları 11 ila 14 arasında değişen 582 erken ergen örneklem grubu çalışmaya gönüllü olarak katılmıştır. Ölçümler, kısa bir başa çıkma davranışları ve psikolojik zorlukları ölçen Likert ölçeğinin kullanıldığı bir öz bildirim anketini içermektedir. Araştırma sonuçları, Vietnam'daki öğrencilerin önemli düzeyde psikolojik zorluklardan muzdarip olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Belirli başa çıkma davranışları, psikolojik güçlüklerdeki varyansın yüzde 27,8'ini açıklarken, araçsal destek kullanımı, kendini oyalama, inkar, davranışsal ayrılma, kendini suçlama ve kabullenme, öğrencilerin psikolojik güçlüklerini artırdığını önemli ölçüde öngörmüştür. Öte yandan, aktif başa çıkma ve araçsal destek kullanımı öğrencilerin psikolojik zorluklarının azalmasını yordamaya katkıda bulunmuştur. Bu sonuçlar, Vietnam'daki eğitimcilerin psikolojik zorluk yaşayan öğrencilere yönelik olarak uyumsuz başa çıkma davranışlarını ortadan kaldırmaya ve aktif başa çıkma davranışlarını artırmaya odaklanan psikolojik müdahalelerde bulunabilecekleri bağlamında yorumlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Başa çıkma davranışları, Psikolojik zorluklar, Ortaokul öğrencileri

Introduction

Middle school students (6–9 grades) in Vietnam is a stage of transformation from child to adult, which has shown physical, psychological and social rapid development compared to other ages. This leads to prevalent psychological crises and disorders (Yoon et al., 2023). Nguyen (2014) also proved that middle school students have more psychological difficulties than other stages. According to Who (2021), around 14.0% of those who aged 10-19 experience mental health conditions. In school environment, students' psychological difficulties are manifested in relationships with friends (e.g. isolation, violence); with teachers (e.g. feeling of being treated unfairly, not being respected), and in academic activity (e.g. difficulty understanding lessons, too many lessons, no motivation) (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Le, 2019; Tran et al., 2020; Nguyen & Truong, 2022).

When having psychological problems or stress, middle school students often use different strategies to deal with (Vo & Nguyen, 2011; Cicognani, 2011; Pham & Pham, 2016). The most commonly used response was found to be confronting the problem and trying to solve it (Cicognani, 2011; Pham & Pham, 2016). The behavior concerning seeking social support from friends and family when facing difficulties was also seen in middle school students (Cicognani, 2011; Scardera et al., 2020). Cicognani (2011) showed that the adolescents reported high use of active coping strategies such as supports from parents and friends in dealing with school-related problems. Nguyen and Truong (2022) showed that 51,4% of early adolescent seeking support from friends and 37% of them had support from family. These positive strategies can reduce psychological difficulties for early adolescents (Scardera et al., 2020). However, there is still a group of students who demonstrate negative behaviors such as negative emotions of anger, shouting out, avoiding, or self-blaming (Wilson et al., 2005; Pham & Pham, 2016). In addition, withdrawal when having problems with parents, school, and self also used by students (Cicognani, 2011).

Relationship between specific coping behaviors and psychological difficulties was found in previous studies. Children with psychological problem often use avoidance coping strategies (Horwitz, Hill & King, 2011; Seiffge-Krenke, 2011). Horwitz, Hill and King (2011) found that

the specific coping behaviors such as denial, substance use, use of emotional support, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame were significantly and positively correlated with depression. Meanwhile, positive coping strategies such as problem solving or seeking support were negatively correlated with adolescents' mental health (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011). Problem-focused coping was associated with positive psychological adjustment, while problem-avoidant coping was associated with poor adaptation (Ebata & Moos, 1991; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2009). Children who use avoidant coping are more likely to have mental health problems and engage in risky behavior, while coping strategies related to problem solving have an adversarial relationship with these problems (Steiner et al., 2002).

In addition, differences in coping strategies when students have psychological difficulties between male and female were found. In particular, Pham and Pham (2016) showed that males tended to use more active coping strategies as taking action to deal with situations better than females. Also, males were reported high in using alcohol or other drug to help them get through their psychological difficulties while females are more likely to use behaviors that seek social support, avoid difficulties and self-blame (Kim et al., 2014; Pham & Pham, 2016). In another study, males were more likely to use physical activity, alcoholic beverages, and drug use, whereas females were more likely to engage in conversation to help them get over their psychological problem (Goodwin, 2006).

In summary, the literature has indicated psychological difficulties and coping behaviors and their relationship among adolescents. However, this relationship has not been focused specifically in the school context of secondary school students. In addition, previous studies have not systematically determined students' coping strategies related to or predicted their psychological difficulties (Pham & Pham, 2016; Nguyen & Truong, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine level of middle school students' psychological difficulties and their coping behaviors, and examine whether early adolescents' coping behaviors are related to their psychological difficulties. In this research, four hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There is a significant difference on level psychological difficulties between male and female students

H2: There is a significant difference in coping behaviors with psychological difficulties between male and female students

H3: Problem -focused coping has a negative correlation with psychological difficulties

H4: Avoidant coping is positively correlated with psychological difficulties

H5: Emotion -focused coping is positively correlated with psychological difficulties.

Methods

Participants

The population of this study includes all the students from sixth to ninth grade at all the secondary schools Tra Vinh city in the Mekong Delta region of Southern Vietnam. The sample was taken from the population of 5830 using the convenience sampling method. There were 587 students involved with 4% margin of error in sampling using Slovin's Formula voluntarily participated in the study. This study was carried out with a quantitative cross – sectional research approach. Of these students, 287 (49.3%) were male and 295 (50.7%) were female. The Participants ranged from 12 to 15 years old.

Research Instruments

Coping Behaviors. The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) were used to measure students' coping behaviors. This instrument is comprised of 28 items with each coping strategy consisting of a pair of descriptors that were ranged 0 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 3 (I have been doing this a lot). Thus, the total 14 two-item subscales were considered as specific coping behaviors e.g. self- blame including 2 items "I've been criticizing myself" and "I've been blaming myself for things that happened". According to Carver and Weintraub (1989), the 14 subscales were classified into three higher order subscales: (1) problem-focused coping (active coping, planning, restraint coping, seeking social support for instrumental reasons, and suppression of competing activities); (2) emotion-focused coping (positive reinterpretation and growth, religion, humor, acceptance, and seeking social support for emotional reasons); and (3) dysfunctional coping (focus on and venting of emotions, denial, behavioral disengagement, mental disengagement, and alcohol-drug use). Horwitz et al. (2011) also used the Brief COPE of Carver (1997) which are classified into three categories of coping mechanisms: emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping, and avoidant coping; however, specific coping behaviors in broad categories of coping strategies were different with the previous ones (Carver & Weintraub, 1989). Although the specific coping behaviors were used in various studies inconsistently, overall three categories are used comprising problem-solving, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping strategies. On the adaptation of in the literature, in the current study, researchers divided coping behaviors into three groups, with each categorization of coping behaviors described in Table 1. The higher the mean score sub-scales was, the higher the levels of using coping strategies of students were. Reliability of Brief COPE was 0.74.

Psychological difficulties

The instrument was developed based on the previous studies (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019; Le, 2019). The constructs of psychological difficulties, which involved in the questionnaire consist of 14 items of three clusters with relatively microscopic levels: (1) psychological difficulties with friends (4 items) e.g. "I am isolated, without friends"; (2) psychological difficulties with teachers (4 items) e.g. "I feel find the teacher unfair to me"; (3) and psychological difficulties in academic activities with (5 items) e.g. "the curriculum is beyond my difficulty". Participants responded to a five-point Likert scale questionnaire ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (frequency). The score of the total scale is calculated based on the average score of each sub-scale. Conbach's α of the whole scale was 0.81. Higher scores of sub-scales indicate higher levels of psychological difficulties of students.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Science and Education Council of Tra Vinh university (No. 273/QD-DHTV dated 29.8.2022). On August 30, 2022, the Science and Education Council of Tra Vinh university considered the research's benefits, fairness, and all possible sources that might harm the participants and approved the authors' conducting the research.

After the permission and approval from the Science and Education Council of Tra Vinh university, the consent form was sent to students' parents for their consensus. Upon receiving the signed consent form, the survey was carried out. Participants were clearly explained the purposes of the research and contents. Participants were guaranteed that refusing to participate in the study would not result in any harm to them and the participant could refuse any answers or withdraw from the research at any time. All personal information and answered questionnaires of participants were kept confidential in a secure place and used only for the purposes of the study. The data was collected from November to September 2022, during regular class time in classrooms.

Data analysis

All the data were processed by SPSS version 22.0. In this study, the mean and standard deviation were used to determine the psychological difficulties and coping behaviors of students. The correlation was used to determine the significance of the relationship between specific coping behaviors and psychological difficulties. In order to determine significant differences between male and female adolescent students in coping behaviors and psychological difficulties, T-test was used. Finally, multiple regression analyses to examine the exact contribution of each specific coping behavior to the criterion of overall psychological difficulties.

Result

Demographic Differences in Coping Behaviors

The means, standiviation and difference in Coping Behaviors presented in Table 1..

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Brief COPE and their gender differences

| | Overall | | Male | | Female | | t | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|-----------------------------|---------|------|------|------|--------|------|-------|-----------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Problem – focused coping | 2.72 | 0.62 | 2.72 | 0.63 | 2.71 | 0.62 | 1.64 | 0.87 |
| Active coping | 2.90 | 0.73 | 2.91 | 0.75 | 2.89 | 0.71 | 0.24 | .810 |
| Use of instrumental support | 2.54 | 0.88 | 2.51 | 0.89 | 2.57 | 0.88 | -0.78 | .433 |
| Positive reframing | 2.76 | 0.83 | 2.78 | 0.83 | 2.75 | 0.82 | 0.47 | .642 |
| Planning | 2.67 | 0.79 | 2.69 | 0.80 | 2.64 | 0.79 | 0.66 | .509 |
| Avoidant coping | 1.96 | 0.44 | 1.91 | 0.46 | 2.02 | 0.41 | -2.30 | 0.03 |
| Self-distraction | 2.67 | 0.77 | 2.59 | 0.79 | 2.75 | 0.74 | -2.46 | .014 |
| Denial | 2.14 | 0.81 | 2.03 | 0.80 | 2.25 | 0.80 | -3.15 | .002 |
| Behavioral Disengagement | 1.68 | 0.71 | 1.69 | 0.73 | 1.68 | 0.70 | 0.22 | .828 |
| Substance use | 1.13 | 0.43 | 1.19 | 0.55 | 1.07 | 0.27 | 3.35 | .001 |
| Self-Blame | 2.19 | 0.93 | 2.04 | 0.90 | 2.33 | 0.94 | -3.80 | .000 |
| Emotion – focused coping | 2.15 | 0.45 | 2.10 | 0.44 | 2.20 | 0.47 | -2.58 | 0.01 |
| Use of Emotional Support | 2.43 | 0.90 | 2.41 | 0.93 | 2.45 | 0.87 | -0.53 | .600 |
| Venting | 2.23 | 0.78 | 2.14 | 0.76 | 2.31 | 0.79 | -2.61 | .009 |
| Humor | 1.71 | 0.80 | 1.73 | 0.78 | 1.70 | 0.82 | 0.37 | .710 |
| Acceptance | 2.70 | 0.77 | 2.61 | 0.78 | 2.77 | 0.75 | -2.49 | .013 |
| Religion | 1.69 | 0.77 | 1.61 | 0.72 | 1.75 | 0.82 | -2.25 | .025 |

As can be seen from Table 1, specific coping behaviors in problem – focused coping subscale exhibited the higher mean compared with other subscales (M = 2.72, SD = 0.62) in which active coping strategy exhibited the highest mean (M = 2.90). These figures were followed by using of emotion – focused coping subscale (M =2.15, SD = 0.45) in which acceptance showed the highest mean (M = 2.70). Avoidant coping strategy had the lowest mean (M = 1.96, SD = 0.44) in which mean of substance use is the lowest (M = 1.13). In this subscale the specific coping behaviors such as: self-distraction, (M =2.67, SD = 0.77); self -

Blame (M = 2.19, SD = 0.93) and denial (DTB = 2.14, SD = 0.81) had high mean score.

Regarding students’ gender, there was no significant difference in problem – focused coping between the mean scores of males and females. However, the significant statistical difference between them in avoidant coping and emotion-focused coping was found in which females had higher scores than those in males did, $p < 0.05$, except for substance use that males had higher mean scores than female, $p < 0.05$. The results regarding students’ psychological difficulties are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for psychological difficulties and their gender differences

| | Total | | Male | | Female | | t | p |
|-------------------------------------|-------|------|------|------|--------|------|-------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Difficulties with friends | 0.65 | 0.60 | 0.58 | 0.59 | 0.71 | 0.60 | -2.65 | .008 |
| Difficulties with teachers | 0.45 | 0.57 | 0.39 | 0.50 | 0.52 | 0.63 | -2.80 | .005 |
| Difficulties in academic activities | 1.40 | 0.65 | 1.33 | 0.65 | 1.47 | 0.65 | -2.66 | .008 |

Among students’ psychological difficulties, mean score of students’ difficulties in academic activity was the highest (M=1.40, SD = 0.65). Psychological difficulties with their friends and teachers was lower, M = 0.65, M= 0.45, respectively.

A significant difference in psychological difficulties was found in which female got more psychological difficulties than male with $p < 0.01$

In terms of the relationship between coping behaviors and psychological difficulties, the findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between coping behaviors and psychological difficulties

| | Psychological difficulties | | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|------------------------|--------|
| | with friends | with teachers | in academic activities | total |
| Problem – focused coping | -.01 | -.12** | .38** | -.15** |
| Active coping | -.04 | -.08* | -.16** | -.12** |
| Use of instrumental support | -.03 | -.07 | -.18** | -.13** |
| Positive reframing | .02 | -.10* | -.12** | -.09* |
| Planning | .01 | -.11** | -.16** | -.11** |
| Avoidant coping | .31** | .31** | .38** | .43** |
| Self-distraction | .10* | .15** | .19** | .19** |
| Denial | .25** | .17** | .23** | .28** |
| Behavioral disengagement | .13** | .22** | .21** | .24** |
| Substance use | .01 | .08 | -.02 | .02 |
| Self-Blame | .34** | .27** | .38** | .43** |
| Emotion – focused coping | .21** | .17** | .16** | .23** |
| Use of Emotional Support | .03 | -.01 | -.07 | -.03 |
| Venting | .13** | .17** | .15** | .19** |
| Humor | .19** | .19** | .21** | .25** |
| Acceptance | .12** | .05 | .09* | .12** |
| Religion | .14** | .10* | .08 | .13** |

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

As seen in Table 3, avoidant coping behaviors were the highest significantly and positively correlated with psychological difficulties ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). All of the specific coping behaviors in this category had positive relationship with psychological difficulties, except substance use behavior. Emotion – focused coping was also found to have positive correlation with students' psychological difficulties ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.01$), except use of emotional support. Meanwhile, a negative correlation was found between problem – focused coping strategy and psychological difficulties ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$). A difference between this problem – focused coping and the two mentioned coping strategies is that this negative correlation is only statistically significant with students' psychological difficulties in academic activities and relationship with their teachers, $p < 0.05$. No significant correlation was found between problem-solving strategy and psychological difficulties with friends, $p > 0.05$.

Concerning the specific coping behaviors, the highest positive correlation that exhibited in the relationship

between coping strategy and psychological difficulties was self – blame ($r = 0.43$), followed by denial, humor and behavioral disengagement ($r = 0.28$, $r = 0.25$, $r = 0.24$, respectively).

In order to determine the exact contribution of each specific coping behavior to the criterion of overall psychological difficulties, multiple regression analysis was used. Because substance use and emotional support were not significantly related to psychological difficulties, these coping behaviors would not be included in model regression model. First, in order to check the assumptions of normal error distributions and constant error variances, the multi-collinearity was checked. The tolerance values in the regression model ranged from 0.53 to 0.88, $VIF < 2.0$, and the Durbin – Watson statistics is 1.78. Therefore, there was no multi-collinearity and autocorrelation among coping behaviors. Table 4 shows the results of multivariate linear regression on specific coping behaviors that affect students' psychological difficulties.

Table 4. Multivariate linear regression to predict scores of psychological difficulties among students

| Model | B | SE | β | t | p |
|-----------------------------|-------|------|---------|--------|------|
| (Constant) | .225 | .108 | | 2.092 | .037 |
| Active coping | -.062 | .031 | -.095 | -1.998 | .046 |
| Use of instrumental support | -.083 | .023 | -.155 | -3.619 | .000 |
| Positive reframing | .011 | .029 | .020 | .401 | .689 |
| Planning | -.043 | .030 | -.072 | -1.443 | .150 |
| Self-distraction | .056 | .025 | .090 | 2.233 | .026 |
| Denial | .058 | .024 | .098 | 2.408 | .016 |
| Behavioral disengagement | .066 | .026 | .100 | 2.587 | .010 |
| Self-blame | .144 | .021 | .284 | 6.762 | .000 |
| Venting | .049 | .025 | .080 | 1.930 | .054 |
| Humor | .039 | .023 | .067 | 1.681 | .093 |
| Acceptance | .053 | .026 | .085 | 2.043 | .042 |
| Religion | .036 | .024 | .059 | 1.531 | .126 |

F = 17.72; R² = 0.278; adjusted R² = 0.26; Durbin Watson = 1.78

The result of the regression analysis showed that the models have statistical significance ($F = 17.72$; $p < 0.05$). Approximately 27.8% of the variance psychological difficulties could be explained by these specific coping behaviors ($R^2 = 0.278$; $p < 0.01$). Among these predictors, self-distraction, denial, behavioral disengagement, self-blame, and acceptance significantly predicted to increase students' psychological difficulties ($\beta < 0$; $p < 0.05$); meanwhile, active coping, using of instrumental support contributed to a decrease in students' psychological difficulties ($\beta > 0$; $p < 0.05$). Positive reframing, planning, venting, humor and religion did not have statistical significance on psychological difficulties with $p > 0.05$.

Discussion

This study showed that middle school students in Vietnam suffered from considerable levels of psychological difficulties. According to Yoon et al. (2023), psychological problems occur during the time of significant physical, emotional, and social changes in a teenager's life and may be heightened during the transition to high school (Yoon et al., 2023). Among psychological difficulties, Vietnamese students had more psychological difficulties in academic activity, which is in line with previous studies of Pham & Pham (2019) and Tran et al. (2020). This problem is explained based on the overload in school curriculum at secondary level (Le, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). Besides, the impact of puberty, pressures from grades, high expectations of parents, or high demands from teachers also puts students under pressures and mental fatigue in learning (Nguyen, 2023), which then affect students' psychological lives, making students feel uncomfortable, unsafe or confused, worried... even some stressed and stuck (Le, 2019). When having psychological difficulties, students in current study used a variety of coping behaviors in which problem-focused coping strategy was mostly used. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Nguyen, 2014; Pham & Pham, 2019). Problem-focused coping strategies were also most commonly observed among these adolescent athletes (Reeves et al., 2009). This strategy is defined as an

individual's active planning and efforts to change the environment of psychological stress (Kim et al., 2014).

Gender differences in psychological difficulties and coping styles

Results confirmed hypothesis H1 that female students had more psychological difficulties than male which is in line with previous studies (Wilson et al., 2005; Kort-Butler, 2008; Vu et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2023). Indeed, negative psychological symptoms including anger, tension, depression, confusion, and negative moods among females had significantly higher scores than their counterpart did (Wilson et al., 2005). In addition, male students had more hyperactivity and prosocial behavior while female students had more emotional symptoms (Vu et al., 2018).

In the current study, female adolescents had more psychological difficulties in academic, relationship with their teachers and their friends as opposed to male students. This finding is consistent with study of Yoon et al. (2023) who reported that females were higher than males across a range of mental health problems. An explanation for this finding that female adolescents can be vulnerable to emotional problems due to earlier pubertal time (Ge et al., 2001).

This present study has shown similarities and differences in both broad categories of coping strategies and specific coping behaviors among male and female students. Thus, Hypothesis H2 received much support. Among three primary coping strategies, female students were more likely to use emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies than those in male students, which is similar to previous studies (Wilson et al., 2005; Nguyen, 2014). Among behaviors of avoidant coping, females were more likely than to use self-distraction, denial and self-blame. In contrast, males were more likely to use substance use. Among the behaviors of Emotion – focused coping category, females were significantly more likely to use venting, acceptance, religion than those found in males. Tamres et al. (2002) reported that women were more likely to use emotion-focused strategies such as seeking emotional support, positive self-talk and ruminating about

the problem. However, it is interesting that no difference in problem - focused coping strategy was found in both male and female students. This finding is contrary to previous research (Tamres et al., 2002; Nguyen, 2014; Pham & Pham, 2016) which showed that males were significantly more likely than females to use problem-solving strategies. This inconsistent finding may be a need for further research to clarify.

Relationship between specific coping Behaviors and Psychological difficulties

Avoidant coping

In the present study, avoidant coping was used less than the other strategies, however, it had the highest correlation with psychological difficulties. According to Dijkstra and Homan (2016), avoidance coping is considered to be maladaptive because it often exacerbates stress without helping a person deal with the things. Thus, avoidant coping can cause students to increase their psychological difficulties. Also, this strategy increased in symptoms of anxiety and depressive symptoms predicting later increases in maladaptive behaviors (Richardson et al., 2021). In avoidant coping strategy, this study revealed that self-blame had the highest relationship with students' psychological difficulties and it was also the strongest independent predictor of increasing students' psychological difficulties as in the regression model. This finding is consistent with previous research that has indicated a positive relationship between self-blame and psychological problem (Fear et al., 2009; Tilghman-Osborne et al., 2008). Schacter and Juvonen (2017) claimed that characterological self-blaming attributions as a social cognitive mechanism which accounts for a link of depressive symptoms and victimization with middle school students. Similarly, in the present study, self-distraction, denial, and behavioral disengagement were found to be positively related and increase students' psychological difficulties which hypothesis H4 is confirmed (except for substance use).

Substance use was not correlated with students' psychological difficulties, which is not in line with previous studies. Cerbone and Larison (2000) revealed that substance use was positively related to stress. Adolescents used alcohol or drugs can regulate their negative mood (Turner et al., 2005). In our sample, the percentage of students using this strategy was quite low because the Vietnamese law is not allowed children under 16-year-old using substance such as alcohol, beer and drugs (QH, 2019). Thus, this substance use strategy is not large enough to produce a statistically significant correlation.

Emotion – focused coping

We hypothesized that emotion-focused coping strategy significantly positively correlated with students' psychological difficulties. The findings showed that in this coping strategy, acceptance, venting, humor, religion had positive correlation with students' psychological problem; thus, hypothesis H5 is much confirmed. This means that the more these specific coping behavior students used, the more psychological difficulties they got. Baqutayan (2015), with a historical overview on stress and coping mechanisms, also showed that emotion-focused coping styles were related to higher levels of psychological distress. In the regression model of the current study, acceptance also increased students' psychological difficulties. This finding is not consistent with the finding of previous research studies (Hayes et al., 2006; Cook &

Hayes, 2010). According to Cook and Hayes (2010), acceptance-based coping is predicted associated with better outcomes across a broad array of human problems. This inconsistent finding can be explained that when middle school students accepted the reality that it happened, they would not take action to improve the situation or cope with their psychological problems, thereby contributing to increasing their psychological difficulties.

Problem-focused coping

Problem-solving strategies often enhance feelings of control and reduce stress and its adverse consequences, assuming that the situation can be changed (Baqutayan, 2015). Individuals with problem-focused style tend to actually make changes in their situation or their perception of a situation in order to make it less or no longer stressful. Our result showed that a negative correlation between problem-focused coping (active coping, use of instrumental support, positive reframing, planning) and psychological difficulties, which confirmed hypothesis H3. However, concerning the regression model to predict students' psychological difficulties, only active coping and using of instrumental support were predicted having reduced students' psychological difficulties. This means that if students know how to solve problems in a positive way and using support from others such as friends and relatives, these will help protect themselves from encountering psychological difficulties. Social support plays an important role in the prevention and treatment of mental health problems (Scardera et al., 2020). Indeed, it is claimed that less social support is one of the most prominent predictors responsible for more mental health problems including anxiety and depression (Siedlecki et al., 2013).

Conclusion

This current study has revealed that middle school students in Vietnam have suffered more psychological difficulties in academic activity, in which female students had more psychological difficulties than those in male students. Problem-focused behavior had negative correlation with psychological difficulties, in which active coping and use of instrumental support contributed to reducing students' psychological difficulties; meanwhile, avoidant behavior and emotion- focused coping had positive relationship with psychological difficulties in which self-distraction, denial, behavioral disengagement, self-blame, use of instrumental support and acceptance were significantly predicted to increase students' psychological difficulties. This present study suggests that educators should reduce academic pressure that middle school students face as well as establish psychological interventions for students with psychological difficulties in focusing on eliminating maladaptive coping behaviors and enhancing active coping behaviors.

Limitation and future studies

Despite the above valuable findings on psychological difficulties and coping behaviors of middle school students in the Vietnamese context, the current study has some certain limitations. Firstly, as the sample of early adolescents was selected in four selected school in a region, the results cannot be generalised to other early student adolescents from other regions. The results should thus be interpreted with caution due to its relatively small sample size. Second, a convenience sampling procedure could lead to biases in research results. Furthermore, data

were collected through self-report questionnaires with an expansion to a larger population from other provinces in Vietnam. In addition, studies should pay attention to random sampling and use multiple methods for evaluation (both students and teachers) may avoid self – report biases.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Before conducting the research, permission was obtained from the The study was approved by the Science and Education Council of Tra Vinh University (No. 273/QD-DHTV dated 29.8.2022). The Science and Education Council of Tra Vinh University considered the research's benefits, fairness, and all possible sources that might harm the participants and approved on ethical issues via a Certificate of Approval prior to conducting the research. Consent forms were obtained from the guardians.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The author declares that no competing interests in this manuscript.

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Authors' Contributions

NTT contributed to analysis, interpretation, article writing. N.T.L contributed to technical and material support. Both authors carried out the proposal of the main idea of the research, the collection of data read, revision of manuscript and have read and approved the final article.

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