

Research report: **THE IDENTIFICATION OF COPING STRATEGIES OF YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS AT VULNERABLE GROUPS IN NORTH LITHUANIA AND SOUTH LATVIA**



**Interreg V-A Latvia–Lithuania Programme 2014–2020**

**THE IDENTIFICATION OF COPING STRATEGIES OF YOUTH AND ADOLESCENTS AT VULNERABLE GROUPS IN NORTH LITHUANIA AND SOUTH LATVIA<sup>1</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Interreg V-A Latvia – Lithuania Cross Border Cooperation Programme 2014-2020 aims to contribute to the sustainable and cohesive socio-economic development of the Programme regions by helping to make them competitive and attractive for living, working and visiting.

Šiauliai University together with partner (Rēzekne Technology Academy, Latvia) runs the project „Developing of Social Psychological Support Service System through Implementation of Method of Positive Coping Strategies and Enhancement of Social Inclusion for People in Vulnerable Groups“ (*„Socialinės psichologinės paramos paslaugų sistemos vystymas diegiant teigiamo poveikio strategijų metodą ir stiprinant labiausiai pažeidžiamų gyventojų grupių socialinę įtrauktį“*) POZCOPING, Nr. LLI-163 within the framework of **Interreg V-A Latvia–Lithuania Programme 2014–2020**. This project is funded by the European Union. Total projects size is **631 294,15** EUR. Out of them co-funding of European Regional Development Fund is **536.600,03** EUR. ***This report has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of Siauliai University and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.***

The main objective of the project is preparation for developing social psychological support service system while implementing Positive Coping Strategies methods for people in vulnerable groups by creating instrument for measure of social inclusion for adolescents and youth (young families) at social risk.

Identification and implementation of scientific based methods will expand content and social psychological support in social services activity.

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**Subject of the research.**

The main subject of the research – identification of coping strategies of youth by using WCQ questionnaire.

**Aims of the research.**

- *To identify coping strategies of youth (by using Ways of Coping Questionnaire<sup>2</sup> (WCQ) in Lithuania (N=350) and Latvia (N=350) (N=700)*

- *Adapted questionnaire for identification of coping strategies (WCQ) for Lithuanian and Latvian social cultural contexts*

**Research sample:** 700 people in people in vulnerable groups. The sample was completed by targeting sampling with the main criteria for the selection of research participants – individuals of vulnerable groups. The study followed the basic principles of the ethical research.

**Methodology and methods.**

The quantitative research was conducted by using Ways of Coping Questionnaire, developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1988), which consists of 66 statements divided into 8 scales: confrontational coping, dissociation, self-control, seeking for social support, taking responsibility, running-avoidance, planned problem solving, positive overestimation.

To respond to the statements in this questionnaire, respondents must have a specific stressful situation in mind. They had to think for a few moments about the most stressful situation that they have experienced in the *past week*. By "stressful" authors of the questionnaire mean a situation that was difficult or troubling for the respondent, either because they felt distressed about what happened, or because they had to use considerable effort to deal with the situation. The situation may have involved respondent family, his/her job, friends, or something else important to the respondent. Before responding to the statements, respondents had to think about the details of this stressful situation, such as where it happened, who was involved, how did they act, and why it was

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<sup>2</sup> For use by Darius Gerulaitis only. Received from Mind Garden, Inc. on June 28, 2017

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important. While respondent may still be involved in the situation, or it could have already happened, it should be the most stressful situation that respondent experienced during the week.

**Each statement should be indicated, by circling 0, 1, 2 or 3, to what extent respondent used it in the situation. Key: 0 = Does not apply or not used 1 = Used somewhat 2 = Used quite a bit 3 = Used a great deal.**

Statistical analysis of the collected data was carried out using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) software version 22.0.

**Scoring the Ways of Coping Questionnaire. Raw Scores.** To score the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, we had to add the raw score for each item on the scale to get a total score. There are four possible responses 0, 1, 2, and 3. These are also the weights that should be used to get the raw score. Not all 66 items are scaled.

They key:

<i>Number of items</i>	<i>Item in the scale</i>	<i>Scale</i>
6	6, 7, 17, 28, 34, 46	Confronting Scale
6	12, 13, 15, 21, 41, 44	Distancing
7	10, 14, 35, 43, 54, 62, 63	Self – Controlling
6	8, 18, 22, 31, 42, 45	Seeking Social Support
4	9, 25, 29, 51	Accepting Responsibility
8	11, 16, 33, 40, 47, 50, 58, 59	Escape-Avoidance
6	1, 26, 39, 48, 49, 52	Planful Problem Solving
7	20, 23, 30, 36, 38, 56, 60	Positive Reappraisal

Raw scores describe the coping effort for each of the eight types of coping. High raw scores indicate that the person often used the behaviours described by that scale in coping with the stressful event.

**Relative Scores .** Relative scores describe the proportion of effort represented for each type of coping and are expressed as a percentage that ranges from 0 to 100. A high relative score on a scale means that the person used those coping behaviours more often than they used other behaviours.

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## **THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF STRESS COPING**

Stress is a phenomenon of biological, psychological origin which is described as a pressure, tension; it is a human condition resulting from various extreme effects. Usually, stress is considered as a psychological and physical strain or tension generated by physical, emotional, social, economic or occupational circumstances or events (Colman, 2015). Such physiological and psychological tension is from time to time experienced by nine out of ten country's residents; therefore, biomedical and psychological analysis of this phenomenon is reasoned and understandable (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2009). The author of the classical theory of stress, Selje (Encyclopaedia Britannica), stated that stress is not just a negative phenomenon, it is a condition necessary for functioning of living organisms, it is impossible to avoid it and it is determined by many factors of social environment (the development of the society, economics). Stress is harmful when it exceeds available human resources, it exhausts the organism, particularly the nervous system, causes diseases. During stress all stressors (irritants) require reorganisation of the organism and the organism reacts to them in its full capacity. Stress mobilises adaptive capacities of the organism in order to cope with an obstacle. The impact of the stressor can be positive when it activates and motivates to overcome difficulties. However, much more often stressors pose threat to human health and safety, quality performance and learning. The author believes that stress is a process the dynamics of which is the dynamics of life and is hardly avoidable.

Analysing scientific articles of authors of biomedical, social sciences about stress manifestation, peculiarities, underlying factors, they can be conditionally divided into micro (personality) and macro (social environment) levels. In the most general sense, authors describing the latter level, name such factors as increased responsibility, inappropriate allocation of duties, trivial control, increased workload, fear of losing one's social status, insecurity, bad relations with colleagues or peers, unclear performance goals, absence of management support and assistance (Burke, 2009).

Stress peculiarities and its coping possibilities are analysed by a number of foreign and Lithuanian authors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Parker & Endler, 1992; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Kriukova, 2010; Grakauskas & Valickas, 2006; Bubelienė & Merkys, 2009, 2012; Kalpokienė & Gudaitė, 2007; Kepalaitė, 2013; Loikienė & Pileckaitė-Markovienė, 2013). These studies mainly disclose the experience of stress by adults engaged in various professions and activity areas. The

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number of studies about stress in different periods of persons' development is insufficient, although the increased stress in adolescence is one of the most urgent problems in today's schools (Kutkienė, 2006).

The number of studies analysing the most burning stressful situations of different age persons encountered by adolescents and young people is insufficient. Some authors (Kepalaitė, 2013; Klizas & Šulnienė, 2012) used the scales, disclosing the stress intensity level and presented characteristics of their reliability and validity; qualitative research strategies and reliability procedures of used methodologies employed by the authors are insufficiently disclosed. According to the data of available literature sources, first validation tests of the adolescent stress questionnaire were conducted by Pileckaitė-Markovienė and Šiukaitienė (2014). They drew attention to Zimmer-Gembeck's, Skinner's (2008) study and stated that most often adolescents' and young people experienced stress was related to educational institutions (school, professional school, colleges) (Šiukaitienė, Pileckaitė, & Markovienė, 2014, p. 10 quote Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2008) and problems with teachers, lecturers.

### THE ANALYSIS OF DATA RESEARCH

Generalizing in brief data of the research, we can preliminary state that in order to cope with the stress, respondents usually are using such strategies as: self-control ( $16,3 \pm 6,3$  percent), pursuing for social support ( $14,9 \pm 4,9$  percent), planned problem solving ( $13,3 \pm 5,9$  percent), confronting coping ( $12,4 \pm 4,8$  percent), isolation ( $11,4 \pm 3,7$  percent), escaping-avoiding ( $11,0 \pm 4,5$  percent).

We can say that most self-control and social support to overcome stress, and are least likely to use runaway or avoidance, as well as confronting coping. Coping with the stress usually used by the youth at social risk was influenced by demographic and social factors (gender, age, education, work experience and institution).

According to the research data, women statistically significantly more often used self-control ( $14.08 \pm 3.28$  percent) than men ( $12.23 \pm 2.82$  percent) did, whereas  $p < 0.05$ . Males statistically more frequently use escape – avoidance coping ( $11, 5 \pm 4, 7$  percent), than females ( $9, 3 \pm 4, 7$  percent),  $p < 0.05$ ). In addition, male more frequently use positive overestimation ( $9, 7 \pm 4, 3$  percent), than woman ( $5, 8 \pm 5, 1$  percent). There are no other statistically significant differences among other modes of overcoming, since  $p > 0.05$ .

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Coping strategies and gender issues. *p<0,05		Mean	SD	p
Confrontation	Male	11,79	4,47	0,083
	Females	14,93	5,08	
Distancing	Male	11,29	3,07	0,723
	Females	11,74	5,49	
Self-Control	Male	12,23	2,82	0,005 *
	Females	14,08	3,28	
Social Support	Male	15,73	6,94	0,950
	Females	15,90	12,13	
Accepting Responsibility	Male	11,10	5,52	0,366
	Females	9,83	6,54	
Escape-Avoidance	Male	11,49	4,60	0,035*
	Females	9,31	4,69	
Planful Problem Solving	Male	13,23	5,02	0,852
	Females	13,60	8,77	
Positive overestimation	Male	9,67	4,32	0,001*
	Females	5,81	5,03	

The comparison of the application of overcoming methods by age groups revealed statistically significant differences. According to ANOVA analysis, statistically significant differences were found with the methods of runaway-avoiding ( $p = 0.039$ ) and positive overestimation ( $p = 0.027$ ). Analyzing these differences more attentively, statistically significant differences were detected among different age groups. The frequency of the application of runaway-avoiding was statistically significantly different among respondents aged 20-25 years and 25-29 ( $p = 0.040$ ). Youth from 20 to 25 were more likely to use the method of runaway-avoidance than older one.

A correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationships between the frequency of using of the methods of overcoming and the age. During it, the statistically significant weak negative relations between the application of the methods of confronting overcoming ( $r=-0.186$ ) and runaway-avoiding ( $r=-0.254$ ) methods and age were detected, whereas  $p<0.05$ . A statistically significant positive relationship between the age and the application of the standard problem solving method ( $r = 0.213$ ) was also detected as  $p <0.05$ . We can say that the older is the age, the confrontational overcoming and the method of runaway-avoiding stress methods are the less commonly used. Also, the older the age, the more commonly used was the planned problem-solving method.

Comparing the application of the methods of overcoming by different work experience groups, statistically significant differences were detected. According to the results of ANOVA analysis,

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statistically significant differences were found with the methods of runaway-avoiding ( $p = 0.037$ ) and pursue for social support ( $p = 0.049$ ). Analyzing these differences more thoroughly, statistically significant differences were detected between different work experience groups. The frequency of the application of runaway-avoiding was statistically significantly different between the respondents with 1 year experience and with the experience of 5 years and more ( $p=0,027$ ). The method of the pursue for social support was used statistically significantly more frequently by the personnel with the work experience of 1-5 years, than by the personnel with the work experience of up to 1 year ( $p=0.046$ ).

In order to determine the relationship between the frequency of the overcoming methods and the length of work experience, a correlation analysis was performed, in which a statistically significant weak relationship was found between the use of runaway-avoidance ( $r = -0.256$ ) and work experience, since  $p < 0.05$ . A statistically significant positive correlation between the length of work experience and the planned problem-solving method ( $r = 0.248$ ) was also detected, since  $p < 0.05$ .

We can state that the higher the length of work experience, the less commonly was used the method of runaway-avoiding to overcome stress. Also, the higher the length of work experience, the more commonly was used the problem-solving method

The planned problem solving method is more commonly used by people working in other institutions than in public institutions ( $p = 0.042$ ) and in non-governmental organizations ( $p = 0.011$ ).

In the course of the research, we analyzed possibilities of coping with stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in Lithuania contexts of their subjective experiences. We wanted to find out the ways of coping with stressful situations used by the professionals of these countries, which are likely to help to cope with difficulties, reduce internal tension, regain spiritual balance and to allow them to seek personal and professional self-actualization (Table 1).

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Table 1

**The Experience of Lithuanian Social Welfare Professionals: the Context of Stress Coping**

Category	Subcategory	Examples of proving statements	Frequency of statements
<b>Individual stress coping</b>	<b>Emotional stress coping</b>	<i>“... I am looking for a positive, I see not half empty but half full glass of delicious juice ...”, “... reading books ...”, “... engaging in my favourite activities ...”, “ I use my humour and irony ...”</i>	17
	<b>Physical stress coping</b>	<i>“... A walk in nature or physical work ...”, “... sport ...”, “... I strictly regulate my agenda ...”, “ Sometimes even just sleep ...”, “... sitting near the fire ... “</i>	9
<b>Social-group stress coping</b>	<b>Social support</b>	<i>“... I try to solve all problems through communication, speaking ...”, “... conversation with family members ...”, “... mutual support groups ...”, “... art, music therapy ..”</i>	10
<b>Simulation of the solution of the stressful situation</b>	<b>Distinguishing of priorities of activities</b>	<i>“... I try to pick out the most important jobs and those jobs that are more necessary for students, not for inspectors ...”, “...when I’m not at work, I don’t answer my office phone, I don’t read emails at the weekends ...”, “... I try to pick out what is most important ...”</i>	5
	<b>Situation analysis</b>	<i>“...situation analysis...”</i>	2
<b>Avoidance to solve problems</b>	<b>Retreat from a stressful situation</b>	<i>“Being stressed, I use retreat if possible...”</i>	3

The analysis of data obtained using the qualitative semi-structured interview enables to disclose the contexts of possibilities for coping with stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions in Lithuania. Having analyzed specialists’ subjective experiences, the generalized semantic units highlight the most common contexts of specialists’ stress coping strategies in their professional activities. These contexts can be relatively divided into *individual*

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*(physical and emotional) and social-group stress coping, simulation of the solution of the stressful situation (distinguishing priorities, analyzing the situation) and the retreat from the situation causing stress.*

The analysis of subjective experiences of social welfare professionals in Lithuania enables to disclose that professionals try to cope with stress in their professional activities at different levels: **intrapersonal individual** (N=26) or **interpersonal social-group** level (N=10) and choose a **constructive way directed towards solution of the problem** (N=7) or simply a **retreat from the problem** (N=3) (Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005, Kriukova 2010, Lazarus & Folkman 1984).

Reconstructing **the intrapersonal individual** (N=26) stress coping space, it is reduced into several subcategories: **physical** (N=9) and **emotional** (N=17). In the contexts of subjective experiences of Lithuanian specialists of social welfare professions, individual (**physical**: “A walk in nature, physical work, sport, sleep, sitting near the fire” and **emotional**: “I’m looking for a positive in many things, I see not half empty but half full glass of delicious juice, engaging in my favourite activities”) stress coping efforts are disclosed. Active individual position, positive attitude to stressful situations and optimism enable specialists to feel themselves as leaders of their life and career, to accept challenges, look for appropriate solutions (Krohne, 2001, Lazarus, 2000).

Analyzing the subjective experience of coping with professional stress experienced by the specialists’ group, both intrapersonal and **interpersonal** level efforts, encompassing contexts of support of the **social group** (N=10), show up. The statements of specialists of social welfare professions of our country disclose the multifaceted content of this context (“I try to solve all problems through communication, speaking, conversation with family members, mutual support groups, art, music therapy”). This presupposes a broad area of social group support, which is successfully used by professionals in stressful situations, starting with communication, family members’ support and extending to participation in self-help groups or in art, music or other therapeutic groups.

Stress emergence factors and stress coping levels can be relatively divided into **internal-intrapersonal** (human personality) and **social-interpersonal** (social environment, interpersonal relations), (Bandzienė, 2009, Pikūnas & Palujanskienė, 2005). The analysis of research data enables to state that specialists of social welfare professions of our country try to cope with stressful

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situations individually, using the most affordable possibilities: walks, sports, physical work, reading books, etc.

Subcategories **distinguishing of priorities of activities** (N=5) and **situation analysis** (N=2), which can be illustrated by statements: “*I try to pick out the most important jobs, situation analysis*” are to be assigned to the group of semantic units that describes the informants’ experience of **solving stressful situations** (N=7).

Analyzing stress coping experience of specialists of social welfare professions, avoidance to solve problems also showed up (N=3). Informants described it as a retreat from stressful situations (“*Being stressed, I use retreat if possible*”).

It is possible to cope with stressful situations in professional activities by simulating various ways of coping. This context of Lithuanian specialists’ subjective experience is poorly developed. They state that in stressful situations they try to analyze difficult situations, set priorities. Some professionals generally avoid addressing stressful situations by simply retreating from them.

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## CONCLUSIONS

1. Intensive various changes in Lithuania inevitably create tension fields and stressful situations in various areas of social life, including the particularly vulnerable social welfare area. We can say that most self-control and social support to overcome stress, and are least likely to use runaway or avoidance, as well as confronting coping. Coping with the stress usually used by the youth at social risk was influenced by demographic and social factors (gender, age, education, work experience and institution).
2. Quantitative survey data revealed that youth in order to overcome stress are tend to use social support, self-control, confronting, and rarely use the run or avoidance. The tendency was also noted that with the increase in the length of work record, the way of running-avoidance stress management is less commonly used. As well as the bigger youth have work experience, the more commonly they use the planned solution to the problems.
3. The findings of the study revealed that female respondents more often use self-control than men, and that education does not affect the choice of ways to overcome stress. Similarly, those working in other institutions are less likely to use a positive overestimation than those working in public or non-governmental institutions, while the way of planned problem solving is more often used by those working in other institutions than at public institutions and non-governmental organizations.
4. Reconstructing the context of coping with stress experienced by specialists of social welfare professions of these countries, certain differences showed up. Lithuanian informants use the most affordable ways for stress coping in the intrapersonal (physical and emotional) area. Due to a more favourable socio-economic situation in the country, Latvian informants have a wider range of stress management possibilities in terms of affordability, content and choice.
5. Summarizing the semantic units provided by the specialists, it appears that informants try to cope with stress in their professional activities in the interpersonal space: Lithuanian informants participate in the activities of other social groups (self-help, therapeutic). Lithuania's possibly young and insufficiently developed social welfare area creates poorer choices for solutions. This is likely to presuppose Lithuanian social welfare specialists' avoidance to solve stressful situations.

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