

## University Students' Ways Of Coping With Stress, Life Satisfaction And Subjective Well-Being

Hatice Odacı<sup>1</sup>

Özkan Çıkrıkçı<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The aim of this research was to determine whether or not university students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being differ significantly according to gender and faculty, and whether ways of coping with stress predict their life satisfaction and subjective well-being. The Coping with Stress Scale, Satisfaction with Life Scale, Subjective Well-Being Scale and Personal Information forms were used for data collection. The participants were 852 university students from different faculties of the Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey. One-way ANOVA, the Tukey test, the t-test and multiple regression analysis were used in data analysis. In this research, students' life satisfaction was significantly higher among females in terms of gender. In terms of the faculty variable, students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being varied significantly. There was a positive correlation between seeking social help and problem focused coping with stress. Additionally, in terms of ways of coping with stress, there was a positive correlation between avoidance and subjective well-being. A problem focused coping with stress strategy predicted life satisfaction and subjective well-being, while avoidance predicted subjective well-being.

**Key words:** ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction, subjective well-being, university students.

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<sup>1</sup> Karadeniz Technical University, Fatih Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Sciences Trabzon/TURKEY, hatodaci@hotmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Artvin Çoruh University, Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Sciences Artvin/TURKEY, ozkanc61@hotmail.com

Stress, regarded as an inescapable phenomenon in modern societies (Hung, 2011), is defined as a psychological state that emerges when individuals encounter physical or psychological difficulties (Atkinson et al., 2002). When the stress that emerges at different times of life and in different spheres becomes excessive, it leads to various diseases and tensions, and can consume the individual's attention and energy. However, once the essential source of stress is identified, it is possible to develop strategies to control these or to keep sources of stress under effective control. Folkman and Lazarus (1986) define coping as the cognitive and behavioral efforts made by individuals in order to meet the requirements and overcome the difficulties created by their internal and external worlds, to keep these under control and reduce tensions. Generally, the function of coping is to protect the individual against negative physical or psychological consequences. A series of personal characteristics, such as the individual's beliefs regarding himself and his social surroundings, his values and objectives, influence ways of coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985).

Coping with stress is classified under three general categories in the literature; problem focused coping, emotional focused coping (Folkman, 1984; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen & Delongis, 1986; Compas, 1987; Coyne & Downey, 1991; Snyder, 1999) and avoidance (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000; Phinney & Haas, 2003) patterns. It is impossible to make a good or bad distinction regarding these patterns, although good or bad results emerge in association with the coping required by the situation and the suitability of the coping employed by the individual (Glyshaw, Cohen & Towbes, 1989; Lazarus, 1993). And this affects the meaning the individual attaches to life.

Life satisfaction, defined as the positive evaluation of all of life in a manner compatible with criteria determined by the individual (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985; Veenhoven, 1996), is a cognitive component of subjective well-being. The individual determines a value regarding his life by comparing criteria assumed for himself and life conditions (Pavlot & Diener, 1993; Deniz, 2006). If a person frequently experiences positive feelings and much fewer negative ones, and achieves a high level of satisfaction from life, then this is also a marker of subjective well-being (Eryılmaz, 2010).

The university education period, corresponding to ages 18-25, is one in which pronounced and rapid psychological and social developments are seen, when physiological development is completed, that involves various developmental tasks and expresses the passage to adulthood (Renk & Creasey, 2003; Dyson & Renk, 2006). Therefore, while studies into stress and the concept of coping continue, this is one of the important stages of life. In this period, young people face a great many stressful situations, such as integrating a rise in

cognitive capacities, achieving expectations of increased independence of the family and adults, developing social roles with one's own and the opposite sex, meeting academic requirements, planning together with selection of profession and preparing for adult roles (Patterson & McCubbin, 1984; Arnett, 2000). These are objectives that a young person will consider seriously for the first time and that society expects to be accomplished. Coping patterns employed in this period are therefore important since they will directly affect the individual's subjective well-being and life satisfaction.

Our scan of the literature revealed that the number of studies in Turkey regarding ways of coping with stress has risen increasingly in recent years (for example, Şahin, 1994; Özer, 2001; Türküm, 2001; Odacı & Kalkan, 2004; Deniz, 2006; Türküm, 2007), but no studies examining life satisfaction, subjective well-being and coping with stress together were encountered. The aim of this study was to determine whether or not university students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being vary significantly according to the variables of sex and faculty and, additionally, to investigate whether ways of coping with stress can predict life satisfaction and subjective well-being.

## **Method**

### **Study Group**

The study group consisted of 852 students, 505 female and 347 male, studying at various faculties of the Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The Coping with Stress Scale (CSS) was used to determine university students' ways of coping with stress, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) to determine their life satisfaction, the Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) to determine their subjective well-being and a Personal Information Form to collect socio demographic data.

*Coping with Stress Scale (CSS):* The CSS, developed as a 5-point Likert-type scale by Türküm (2002) based on Folkman and Lazarus' model, consists of 23 items. From validity and reliability studies using data collected from 498 university students, Türküm (2002) established that the CSS contained three factors accounting for 41.7% of the total variance, that the internal consistency coefficient of the entire scale was .78, and .85, .80 and .65 for the subscales, that subscale item total correlations were .61, .48 and .34 and that the correlation coefficient using the repeat technique at a 10-week interval was .85.

The scale criterion validity was tested using the Ways of Coping with Stress Scale adapted by Hisli-Şahin & Durak (1995), the Beck Depression Inventory, the Internal-External

Locus of Control Focus Scale adapted by Dağ (1991) and the Problem Solving Inventory adapted by Şahin, Şahin and Heppner (1993). The difference between the scores from the CSS and those from the tools in question, .43 and -.32, revealed no correlation and a -.31 (at the  $p < .001$  level) connection. Total possible scores from the 23 items in the CSS range from 23 to 115. The higher the score from the scale, the more intensely ways of coping are employed (Türküm, 2001).

Both descriptive and experimental studies have shown that when the CSS is used, in addition to a single score from the entire scale, consideration of the Avoiding Dealing with Problems, Facing Problems and Seeking Social Support subscale scores will provide more detailed information about ways of coping with stress (Türküm, 2002). This study was performed taking into account the CSS subscale scores.

*Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS):* The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985) was adapted into Turkish by Köker (1991) and Yetim (1991). The scale is a self-reporting Likert-type one, from 1 (not at all) to 7 (completely), consisting of 5 items. Köker (1991) reported a test repeat test consistency coefficient of .85 at a 3-week interval. Yetim (1991) reported a corrected split-half value of .75 and Kuder Richardson a -20 value of .78. Aysan & Harmanlı (2003) determined an internal consistency co-efficient of .85.

*Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS):* This scale was developed by Tuzgöl Dost (2005) in order to determine individuals' levels of subjective well-being. The SWBS is a Likert-type scale consisting of 46 items. The scale contains positive and negative expressions of feeling and personal judgments regarding different areas of life. Validity and reliability studies were performed with 209 university students. SWBS structural validity was determined with basic component analysis. Scale item total score correlations were also investigated. Upper and lower 27% score groups from the scores from the SWBS were compared using the t test; a significant difference was observed between the groups. Investigation of similar scale validities revealed a significant correlation between the SWBS and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) ( $r = -.70$ ). A Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .93 and a test repeat test reliability coefficient of .86 were determined.

*Personal Information Form:* Information about students' gender and faculty attended were recorded on a personal information form prepared by the authors.

### **Procedure**

During the data collection stage, the requisite permission was obtained from the faculty deans. Appropriate days and weeks when subsequent procedures could be performed

were determined by speaking with members of the teaching staff. Procedures were performed in a single session and lasted an average of 20 min. Care was taken to provide standard statements at the beginning of the procedure in each faculty. Carelessly completed or incomplete forms were excluded, and responses from 852 remaining students were analyzed.

### Data Analysis

Once the collection stage was complete, data were prepared for appropriate statistical analysis on computer. SPSS 13.00 was used for data analysis. One-way analysis of variance, the Tukey test, the Independent t test, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and multiple regression analysis were employed.

### Findings

This section is devoted to the research findings.

#### 1. Students' ways of coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance) by gender, life satisfaction and subjective well-being

The t test was applied to data in order to establish whether or not there was a significant difference between female and male students' average scores for coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance), life satisfaction and subjective well-being. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: t test results for ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being scores

Variable	Sex	N	Average	df	t	p
Seeking social support	Female	505	21.46	5.93	1.584	.114
	Male	347	20.82	5.76		
Problem focused coping	Female	505	25.69	7.42	1.349	.178
	Male	347	24.96	8.14		
Avoidance	Female	505	24.01	5.02	.496	.620
	Male	347	23.83	5.19		
Life satisfaction	Female	505	21.09	6.33	4.297	.000*
	Male	347	19.16	6.58		
Subjective well-being	Female	505	155.21	24.92	-.021	.983
	Male	347	155.25	24.24		

\*p<.05

Table 1 shows no significant difference between students' genders, ways of coping with stress and average subjective well-being scores, but a significant correlation in favor of female students between gender and average life satisfaction scores.

#### 2. Students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being in terms of the faculty variable

The F test revealed no significant difference between students' average scores for ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being by faculty attended. The findings are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: F test results for students' average scores for ways of coping with stress (Seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance), life satisfaction and subjective well-being by the faculty variable

Variable	Faculty	N	X	df	F	Tukey Test
Seeking social support	Education	119	22.36	3.57	25.49	1-4, 1-5, 1-6, 8-4, 8-5, 8-6
	Architecture	119	22.35	3.15		
	Communications	88	23.64	5.94		
	Science-literature	123	18.17	4.47		
	Economics and management sciences	92	17.77	6.23		
	Engineering	99	18.23	6.77		
	Dentistry	99	23.97	6.46		
Problem focused coping	Medicine	113	23.14	5.88	149.64	4-1, 5-1, 6-1, 8-4, 8-5, 8-6
	Education	119	30.42	4.85		
	Architecture	119	29.52	5.51		
	Communications	88	29.62	5.79		
	Science-literature	123	18.70	5.04		
	Economics and management sciences	92	17.38	5.32		
	Engineering	99	17.45	4.44		
Avoidance	Dentistry	99	29.68	5.12	4.65	6-4, 7-4
	Medicine	113	29.57	5.33		
	Education	119	25.39	7.72		
	Architecture	119	24.58	4.46		
	Communications	88	23.65	5.53		
	Science-literature	123	24.07	5.31		
	Economics and management sciences	92	22.75	4.91		
Life satisfaction	Engineering	99	23.30	4.70	6.04	1-4, 4-5
	Dentistry	99	22.68	4.75		
	Medicine	113	25.67	4.79		
	Education	119	21.04	6.12		
	Architecture	119	21.65	6.90		
	Communications	88	19.19	6.18		
	Science-literature	123	18.53	6.18		
Subjective well-being	Economics and management sciences	92	18.78	6.21	58.64	8-1, 8-2, 8-3, 8-4
	Engineering	99	20.38	6.34		
	Dentistry	99	19.56	6.95		
	Medicine	113	22.75	5.97		
	Education	119	20.30	6.50		
	Architecture	119	137.52	14.19		
	Communications	88	137.42	14.45		
Science-literature	123	159.07	22.24			
	Economics and management sciences	92	143.31	11.86		
	Engineering	99	171.67	26.80		
	Dentistry	99	169.40	22.70		
	Medicine	113	162.92	24.48		

\*p&lt;.05

Table 2 shows significant differences between students' ways of coping with stress (sss, pfc, a) and the faculty variable ( $F_{sss}=25.49$ ,  $F_{pfc}=149.64$ ,  $F_a=4.65$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In addition, we determined significant differences between life satisfaction ( $F=6.04$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and subjective well-being ( $F=58.64$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and the faculty variable. Tukey post hoc analysis was performed to identify the source of the differences.

The SSS coping with stress sub-dimension score was significantly higher in students attending the science and literature ( $X=4.19$ ), economics and management sciences ( $X=4.59$ ) and engineering ( $X=4.13$ ) faculties compared to those of individuals studying at the education faculty ( $X=1.01$ ). In addition, the scores of students at the faculty of medicine ( $X=5.74$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the faculties of science and literature ( $X=4.97$ ), economics and management sciences( $X=5.36$ ) and engineering ( $X=4.90$ ). Medical faculty students comprised the group that made the highest use of the seeking social support coping with stress strategy.

The problem focused coping scores of students at the education faculty ( $X= 15.23$ ) were significantly higher than those at the science and literature ( $X=11.72$ ), economics and management sciences( $X= 13.04$ ) and engineering ( $X= 12.97$ ) faculties. On the other hand, the scores of students at the faculty of medicine ( $X= 14.40$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the faculties of science and literature ( $X= 10.86$ ), economics and management sciences( $X= 12.19$ ) and engineering ( $X= 12.12$ ).

Avoidance scores for students at the faculties of engineering ( $X= 1.55$ ) and dentistry ( $X= 2.12$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the faculty of science and literature ( $X= 1.06$ ). In addition, the scores of students at the faculty of medicine ( $X= 3.18$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the faculties of science and literature ( $X= 2.08$ ) and engineering ( $X= 2.16$ ). Students at the faculties of medicine and dentistry made greater use of use of avoidance strategy, one of the coping with stress sub-dimensions, than those at other faculties.

In terms of the life satisfaction variable, scores for students at the faculty of education ( $X= 4.99$ ) were significantly higher than those of science and literature faculty students ( $X= 2.50$ ). Similarly, architecture faculty students' life satisfaction scores ( $X= 5.60$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the science and literature( $X= 3.11$ ) and economics and management sciences faculties.

Medical faculty students' subjective well-being scores ( $X= 40.50$ ) were significantly higher than those of students at the faculties of education( $X= 32.40$ ), architecture ( $X= 32.51$ ), communications ( $X= 10.85$ ) and science and literature ( $X= 26.62$ ).

### **3. The correlation between ways of coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance) and life satisfaction and subjective well-being**

Correlations between the Coping with Stress Scale Seeking Social Support, Problem-Focused Coping and Avoidance sub-scales, the Satisfaction with Life Scale and Subjective

Well-Being Scale were calculated using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient analysis. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlational relations between form of coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance), life satisfaction and subjective well-being

Variable	Seeking social support	Problem focused coping	Avoidance	Life satisfaction	Subjective well-being
Seeking social support	1	.400**	.179**	.069*	.037
Problem focused coping		1	.297**	.095**	-.067
Avoidance			1	.006	.093**
Life satisfaction				1	.158**
Subjective well-being					1
Average	21.2054	25.3967	23.9401	20.3075	155.2321
Standard deviation	5.87222	7.72500	5.08956	6.50133	24.63537

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

The analysis results revealed a significant positive correlation between the seeking social support ( $r=0.69$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and problem focused ( $r=0.95$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) coping with stress sub-dimensions. Furthermore, there was a significant positive correlation between the avoidance coping with stress sub-dimension and subjective well-being ( $r=0.93$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

#### 4. Ways of coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance) predictivity of life satisfaction

Multiple regression analysis results regarding seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance ways of coping with stress predictivity of life satisfaction are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Multiple regression analysis of the correlation between life satisfaction and coping with stress

Variable	$\beta$	Std. Error	B	t	p	Bivariate	Partial r
Seeking social support	.040	.041	.036	.972	.331	.033	.033
Problem focused coping	.074	.032	.088	2.291	.022	.079	.078
Avoidance	-.035	.046	-.028	-.772	.440	-.027	-.026

$R=.103$ ;  $R^2=.011$ ;  $F=3.035$ ;  $p<0.001$

Table 4 shows that the problem focused coping way sub-dimension predicts life satisfaction ( $R=.103$ ,  $R^2=.011$ ,  $F=3.035$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Coping with stress (sss, pfc, a) accounts for 1.1% of the total variance in life satisfaction. Examination of the t test results for regression test significance shows that problem focused coping is the most significant predictor ( $B=-.88$ ).

#### 5. Ways of coping with stress (seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance) predictivity of subjective well-being

Standard multiple regression analysis results regarding the ways of coping with stress seeking social support, problem focused coping and avoidance predictivity of subjective well-being are given in Table 5.

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis of the correlation between subjective well-being and coping with stress

Variable	$\beta$	Std. Error	B	t	p	Bivariate	Partial r
Seeking social support	.275	.156	.065	1.756	.079	.060	.034
Problem focused coping	-.409	.122	-.128	-3.351	.001	-.114	-.068
Avoidance	.567	.173	.117	3.280	.001	.112	.090

R= .147, R<sup>2</sup>= .022, F= 6,201, p<.001

Table 5 shows that the problem focused coping and avoidance sub-dimensions predict subjective well-being (R=.147, R<sup>2</sup>=.022, F= 6.201, p<.001). Coping with stress (sss, pfc, a) accounts for 2.2% of the total variance in subjective well-being. Examination of the t test results for regression test significance shows that problem focused coping (B=-.128) and avoidance (B=.117) are the most significant predictors.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This study was intended to determine university students' ways of coping with stress, life satisfaction and subjective well-being according to a number of variables and to reveal the correlations between those variables. No significant difference was determined between students' gender and average scores for ways of coping with stress and subjective well-being. However, a significant difference was identified between gender and average life satisfaction scores. This finding shows that gender is not a determining variable for university students in the scope of this study of ways of coping with stress and subjective well-being. Females' average life satisfaction scores (X=21.09) were significantly higher compared to those of males (X=19.16). This suggests that female students in Turkey attach greater importance to university education than males, because for females alternative options for having a profession and being economically and socially independent may be limited without a university education. No studies directly supporting this finding were encountered. However, research into life satisfaction has reported that psychological variables such as personal tendencies, close relations and culture have a greater effect in accounting for life satisfaction than gender, race and income (Myers & Diener, 1995).

In a study of gender differences in stress and coping with stress, Matud (2004) also emphasized that the gender factor is correlated with both components in the process from perception of stress to the reactions displayed to it. Another study reported that male and female gender role was a significant predictor for problem focused coping and that female gender role was a predictor for emotional based coping (Dyson & Renk, 2006). In a study of university students, Dwyer & Cummings (2001) reported that female students used seeking social support more than males in coping with stress.

In terms of the faculty variable, the highest score for the seeking social support sub-dimension was obtained from the medical faculty. This finding may be interpreted as medical students having superior social skills to students in other faculties. The educational process in these students, with their more intense curricula and practical classes compared to other faculties, may contribute to greater one-to-one sharing with others. In terms of the problem focused coping sub-dimension, education and medical faculty students had higher scores than students in other faculties. These results show that students of medicine and education use the problem focused coping strategy, the most effective and healthiest way of coping with stress. This may be interpreted as students in these faculties being more disposed to resist the stressful situations they encounter and, in parallel with this, to select a successful coping technique.

In terms of the avoidance sub-dimension, the highest scores were obtained from the medical and dentistry faculties. Medical and dental students' making greater use of the avoidance strategy, one of the coping with stress sub-dimensions, than other faculties suggests that students in these faculties make frequent use of this coping strategy. But while using this strategy in order to constantly avoid problems may be interpreted as an unsuccessful approach, when an individual's problem becomes insoluble or if he believes he cannot solve it at that moment and therefore avoids it, but later returns to it at an appropriate time and place and tries to resolve it, then that may be interpreted as a successful approach. In addition, the literature reports that depressive students have a greater tendency to use avoidance in coping with stress compared to non-depressives (Penland, Masten, Zelhart, Fournet & Callahan, 2000), suggesting that levels of depression of students in these faculties also need to be investigated.

Students at the faculties of education and architecture had higher life satisfaction scores compared to those of other faculties. The fact that education and architecture faculty students had a high level of life satisfaction suggests that students at these faculties evaluate their lives positively according to criteria they determine for themselves. Graduates from these faculties in Turkey being more advantaged in terms of finding employment compared to students from the science and literature and economics and management sciences faculties, and their being more optimistic about the future may have contributed to this finding. Medical faculty students had higher average scores for subjective well-being compared to students from other faculties. This result may be attributed to medical faculty students evaluating their lives and themselves positively.

Of the coping with stress sub-dimensions, a significant, life satisfaction was positively correlated with seeking social support and problem focused coping and life satisfaction. In addition, of the ways of coping with stress, there was a significant positive correlation between avoidance and subjective well-being. The problem focused coping with stress sub-dimension was observed to be a predictor of life satisfaction and subjective well-being, and avoidance to be a predictor of subjective well-being. A significant, positive correlation between life satisfaction and the healthy forms of coping with stress seeking social support and problem focused coping is an expected finding. We think that life satisfaction in individuals who succeed in coping with difficulties they encounter will rise in parallel to this. The presence of a positive correlation between avoidance, a passive coping with stress strategy, and subjective well-being may be interpreted as individuals' succeeding in coping with a stressful event in some way leading to them feeling good. One study in the literature reported that, in parallel to the results obtained, there was a positive correlation between life satisfaction and problem focused coping and seeking social support (Deniz, 2006).

In conclusion, since using successful and healthy strategies in coping with stress has a significant effect on life satisfaction and subjective well-being, psychological counseling and guidance services might be provided for individuals to learn healthy coping strategies. Such activities would contribute to individuals being content with themselves and their lives and to their using strategies based on cognitive evaluation. The findings from this research being obtained by pen and paper, and not being supported by different data collection techniques such as meetings and observation, represents a limitation of the study. Another limitation is that only university students were included. We recommend that a study with similar content be performed with individuals not studying at university, as well as comparative studies between groups.

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