STRESS MANAGEMENT COPING STRATEGIES OF ACADEMIC LEADERS IN AN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

In today's demanding academic environment, academic leaders need to be well equipped with stress management coping strategies as they often find themselves in challenging situations and responsibilities. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to investigate the stress management coping strategies used by academic leaders in an institution of higher learning located in Selangor, Malaysia. A mixed-methods research design was employed and the sample population involved 46 academic leaders from a public university. Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative data were statistically analyzed using SPSS while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings showed that a majority of the academic leaders opted towards positive problem-focused engagement strategies such as cognitive restructuring and problem solving strategies followed by emotion-focused engagement which included expressing emotion and social support strategies. Besides that, academic leaders did confess that they sometimes do use disengagement strategies such as wishful thinking, problem avoidance and self-criticism coping strategies but they stressed that they faced problems and stress in a positive and constructive manner. The findings of this study imply that academic leaders in this study are engaged and well informed of stress coping strategies. However, it is recommended

that top management in institutions of higher learning take the initiatives in providing necessary support to academic leaders by educating them on stress management coping strategies.

Keywords: *academic leader, coping strategy, stress management.*

INTRODUCTION

Academic leaders in Institutions of Higher Learning (IHL, hereafter) play an important role as they are responsible to help lead the university towards excellence. Anderson (2009) stressed that the assumption that the teaching profession focused mainly on teaching is very much outdated as the roles and responsibilities of a lecturer have evolved. Nowadays, lecturers are not only considered as educators, but also academic leaders, curriculum developers, coaches and mentors to both colleagues and students alike. Murphy and Curtis (2013) defined an academic leader as an individual who leads and manages change, builds consensus and promotes collaboration, encourages faculty development in the campus, sets academic priorities, champions the programs and then evaluates faculty effectively and fairly. Milburn (2010) further elaborates that academic leaders usually hold various administrative positions in addition to their teaching responsibilities. Deans, deputy deans, programme coordinators and lecturers are considered as important individuals in the university as they are committed to handle demanding responsibilities as academic leaders (Asmahwati et al., 2014).

Likewise, Millburn (2010) also highlights that academic leaders play an important role in their respective department as they need to perform multiple roles in managing and maintaining the learning environment. In addition, drawing on literature from countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom, it is being suggested that there are a number of distinctive features required of leaders in institutions of higher learning in order to ensure staff preservation, autonomy and a spirit of collegiality (Bryman, 2007). Today's leaders need to develop and generate new knowledge, abilities and skills to effectively cope with constant organizational changes. Afnan Al-Shuaiby (2009) further reiterates that one of the most significant functions of IHLs in their reliance on leadership effectiveness

in creating a pleasant teaching environment for faculty and in providing students with quality education. Moreover, Blair (2000) stated that IHLs are increasingly expecting an academic leader to accomplish external funding to be considered as an effective leader.

These roles of academic leaders are also articulated by Asmahwati et al. (2014) who noted that such demanding tasks have forced academic leaders to face stress from their job responsibilities. Murphy and Curtis (2013) further reiterated that academic leaders are often exposed to strong and negative emotions such as stress, anger, anxiety and also frustrations due to their excessive workload. Murphy and Curtis (2013) summarised all the challenges faced by academic leaders into four categories which are: bureaucratic burden, status and demand of leadership, the management of others and role confusion. Bryman (2007) further highlights that bureaucracy as a system of government or business often has many complicated rules and procedures which require academic leaders to balance educational, managerial and political leadership responsibilities. To this, Schermerhorn et al. (2000) added that as academic leaders, role overload in higher education often occurs and one is often expected to do more beyond the call of duty leaving a lecturer often overwhelmed with work. Dyer and Miller (1999) state that academic leaders must cope with the different responsibilities that come with the different major roles. Academic leaders not only need to participate in key decision making meetings but also supervise the daily process of staff, both clerical and professional.

A study conducted by Campbell, Baltes, Martin and Meddings (2007) revealed that 88 percent of leaders often claim that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and more than two-thirds of them believe their stress level is higher today than it was five years ago. Besides that, 60 percent of them emphasised that their organizations failed to provide them with the necessary tools and strategies to effectively manage stress. They also pointed out that their stress was often caused by task demands such as job responsibilities and decision making. The same study further revealed that a lack of resources and time are the most stressful leadership demands experienced by leaders. For a majority, stress is caused by leaders trying to do more with less, and to do it faster. More importantly, close to 80 percent felt that their organisations failed to provide adequate support for stress management and felt they could benefit from a stress management coach.

Another survey led by Groove (2012) highlighted that academic leaders are suffering from growing stress levels as a result of heavy workload. He further elaborates that academic leaders today need to deal with unachievable deadlines, acute time pressures and the need to work quickly. In addition, Brown and Uehara (2008) further added that the daily interactions with students, co-workers and the never-ending fragmented demands of teaching often lead to overwhelming pressure which directly causes stress among academic leaders. Therefore, it is pertinent that academic leaders learn to cope with stress. There are studies that have explored and have looked at students' perspectives of perceived stress and the use of coping strategies (Julismah & Ikmalhisham, 2005; Kausar, 2010). However, there is scant empirical evidence of such studies conducted in Asia especially among academic leaders in IHLs in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the stress management coping strategies used by academic leaders in a public university located in Shah Alam, Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Morris and Miller (2008), the shared governance policies of most universities assign academic decisions such as student admissions criteria, faculty hiring and endorsement, curriculum growth and awarding degrees to academic leaders at the faculty level. They further specified that the faculty typically expects the university president to focus on political relations, fund-raising, and protecting their academic programs and they usually allow academic leaders to look into academic issues on their own. Besides that, academic leaders also need to be able to identify problems and resolve them in a timely manner whilst adapting their leadership style accordingly. Setting department goals and making satisfactory progress in motivating the staff to meet the established goals is also another important skill. Thus, in order to meet the objectives, academic leaders must search and discover the best method in motivating their faculty members. They should also be active in their profession and have respect for their professional colleagues. To handle all these roles and responsibilities, Morris and Miller (2008) also highlight that academic leaders need to possess psychological characteristics which include aptitude, physical stamina, maturity, judgment, attitude, reliability, and dependability. More

importantly, they need to be well equipped with stress and burnout coping strategies.

According to Mostert and Joubert (2005), coping is a central theme often discussed in stress and burnout research and studies have focused on individuals coping responses to different sources of stress. Generally, coping strategies refer to how people try to cope with stress and manage it effectively. Lazarus (1999) points out that coping represents an individual's cognitive, affective and behavioural effects to manage specific external and internal demands. Folkman and Lazarus (1985, p. 5) further elaborate coping responses as "cognitions (thoughts) and behaviours that a person uses to reduce stress and to moderate its emotional impact". They further indicate that whether it is a dispositional or situation-specific response, coping behaviors are divided into two basic frameworks, i.e. problem and emotion–focused coping dimensions. According to Latack and Havlovic (1992) these two coping dimensions differ in the way coping behaviour is targeted where the problem focused coping dimension is aimed at solving the problem whilst emotion focused coping dimension is directed towards regulating the emotion of the person under stress. According to researchers (Edwards & Olden, 2003; Rothmann & Van Rensburg, 2002), problem–focused types of coping strategies are directed at the problem and look for ways to manage and solve the problem, meanwhile emotion-focused coping strategies involve reducing the effects of stressful feelings caused by unpleasant experiences through relaxation, the use of substances, social activities or defence mechanism, and also avoidance.

Problem-focused coping strategies are similar to problem-solving tactics. These strategies encompass efforts to define the problem, generate alternative solutions, weigh the costs and benefits of various actions, take actions to change what is changeable, and if necessary, learn new skills. Problem-focused efforts can be directed outward to alter some aspect of their self. Many of the efforts directed at self fall into the category of reappraisal for example, changing the meaning of the situation or event, reducing ego involvement, or recognizing the existence of personal resources or strengths. Meanwhile, emotion-focused coping strategies are directed toward decreasing emotional distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These tactics include such efforts as distancing, avoiding, selective attention and blaming, minimizing, wishful thinking, venting emotions,

seeking social support, exercising and mediating. Tobin (2001, p.3) in his Manual Coping Strategies Inventory identifies four main coping strategies often used in managing stress. Given below are the specific coping strategies people use in response to stressful events:

1. **Problem Focused Engagement** is a coping strategy which includes both the Problem Solving and the Cognitive Restructuring subscales. These subscales involve cognitive and behavioral strategies to change the situation or to change the meaning of the situation for the individual. These coping efforts are focused on the stressful situation itself. These strategies attempt to alleviate or eliminate stressful situations through taking control and weighing up the negative and also positive impacts.

2. **Emotion Focused Engagement** refers to coping skills that aim to reduce and manage the intensity of negative and distressing emotions that a stressful situation has caused rather than solve the problematic situation itself. It includes the subscales - Social Support and Express Emotions. The items reflect open communication of feelings to others and increased social involvement, especially with family and friends. These coping efforts are focused on an individual's emotional reaction to the stressful situation.

3. **Problem Focused Disengagement** is a coping strategy that exercises restraint. This subscale includes both Problem Avoidance and Wishful Thinking. The items reflect denial, avoidance, and an inability or reluctance to look at a situation differently. They reflect cognitive and behavioral strategies to avoid the situation. Even though restraint is often overlooked as a potential coping strategy, it is sometimes seen as a functional response to stress.

4. **Emotion Focused Disengagement** includes the subscales of Social Withdrawal and Self Criticism. The subscale involves shutting oneself and one's feelings off from others, and criticizing or blaming oneself for what happens.

A study conducted by Dewi (2011) indicated that experienced system management workers who use a balance of problem-focused coping strategy and emotion-focused coping strategies are most successful in dealing with the stress of staying perpetually up-to-date. She further elaborated that experienced employees who deploy different combinations of coping strategies end up with different levels of distress but a majority often opt towards problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping strategies. The most effective strategy is problem solving if the individual has a realistic chance of changing the stressor or the aspect that lead to the stressor. Research has shown that problem-focused coping is typically used in situations that are perceived to be controllable for example work issues (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). In contrast, emotion-based coping is usually used in situations where the stressors are less controllable. Conversely, emotion-based coping is usually used in situations where the stressors are less controllable for example, terrorist attacks.

Fawzy et al. (1990) indicate that emotional focused coping strategies are often utilized when the problem is out of a person's control and in situations where a person has a terminal illness or sudden health problems and the person needs to cope and try to accept the situation. In addition, Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) further add that that the use of such coping strategies may reduce depression and hostility while increasing life satisfaction. Galor (2012) indicates that emotion focused coping increases the sense of pleasure, positivity and contentment in human lives and thus enables people to increase their ability to focus on that which can be changed. He further identified the following as examples of behavioural emotional focused coping strategies: listening to music, massage, meditation, physical exercise, spending time with friends, keeping a diary or journal, taking a hot bath, expressing emotions creatively for instance by painting and having a sense of humour. Zeidner and Zammer (1992) report that spiritual factor too can help cope with stress as it provides meaning and a larger context in which the situation can be understood.

Galor (2012) elaborates that seeking social support for emotional reasons such as getting moral support, sympathy, or understanding as an aspect of emotion-focused coping strategies. Snow et al. (2003) further notes that social support is a significant feature of an individual's social environment and varying levels of support will be perceived as available

to the individual in times of need. They further indicate that recent attention has turned to examining the role of social support in managing the stressful situation. For instance, problem-solving coping strategies on the part of the individual and instrumental support from others are both aimed at modifying or managing the stressful situation. In addition, social support may operate in the stress process to reduce the perceptions or experience of work stressors and therefore indirectly reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes such as psychological symptoms. Just as active coping may serve to mediate the effects of social support coping strategy, work stressors may also operate as another mediating pathway. Support for this hypothesis is found in several cross-sectional studies in which greater perceived social support was related to lower levels of reported work stressors (Griffith et al., 1999; Jayaratne, Himle & Chess, 1988; Kumari & Sharma, 1990; Pompe & Heus, 1993).

On the other hand, there are situations where people disengage themselves from stressful situations. For instance, the exercise of restraint is sometimes used as a problem focused coping strategy. Even though restraint is often overlooked as a potential coping strategy, it is sometimes needed and is a functional response to stress. According to Dewi (2011), restraint coping is waiting until an appropriate opportunity to act presents itself, holding one-self back, and not acting prematurely. It can be viewed as an active coping strategy in the sense that the person's behaviour is focused on dealing effectively with the stressor, but it is also a passive strategy in the sense that using restraint means not acting. According to Myers (1995), self-criticism is another frequent stress coping strategy used among people who report a high level of stress. Zuroff et al. (2005) highlighted that research in both clinical and non-clinical samples has shown that in the face of stressful life events, the maladaptive traits of self-criticism and dependency are related with raised depressive symptoms and augmented threat for an episode of depression.

Through the effective use of coping strategy, the negative influence of stress on health and performance can be reduced. For instance, the use of coping strategies allows a person to successfully manage the stressful situation. When there is a poor fit between a person's stress levels and his or her coping capacity, adjustment strategies are likely to be ineffective and negative health outcomes can occur; thus, leading to poor performance

later on. Conversely, when appropriate coping resources are available, a person is likely to manage stress effectively. With the ever changing academic scenario of today, this study aimed to investigate the stress management coping strategies used by academic leaders at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This study was descriptive in nature and involved a sample population of 46 academic leaders which consisted of deans, deputy deans, program coordinators and lecturers from an institution of higher learning located in Malaysia. The IHL is one of the largest universities in Malaysia. This study involved academic leaders from three randomly selected branch campuses of the university which is located in Shah Alam in the state of Selangor in Malaysia. The data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire for this study was adapted from the Manual Coping Strategy Inventory (Tobin, 2001).

The questionnaire was divided into three (3) parts. Part A explored the demographic profile of the respondents while Part B consisted of 72 items on coping strategies used while Part C comprised open-ended questions which investigated the challenges and stressful situations faced by academic leaders and strategies they employed to reduce their stress. The questionnaire was piloted and below is the results of the Cronbach's alpha reliability test. The reliability index of the questionnaire are seen in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis for Coping Strategy Inventory Based on Each Strategy

Component	Alpha
Problem Solving (n=15)	.72
Cognitive Restructuring (n=15)	.73
Express Emotions (n=15)	.69
Social Support (n=15)	.69
Problem Avoidance (n=15)	.62
Wishful Thinking (n=15)	.68
Self-Criticism (n= 15)	.71
Social Withdrawal (n=15)	.84

Table 2: Reliability Analysis for Coping Strategies in General

Component	Alpha
Overall Coping Strategy	0.713

The quantitative data were statistically analyzed using SPSS version 20. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data to trace emerging themes pertaining to the variables in the study.To triangulate the findings, interviews were conducted with six academic leaders. Respondents were coded for easy reference. For example, in Campus A, the respondents were given pseudonyms which began with the alphabet "A" – i.e. A1, and A2 while respondents from campus B, were referred to as B1 and B2. Likewise, respondents from campus C were given pseudonyms beginning with the alphabet "C" and they were C1 and C2.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data from the demographic profile revealed that from the 46 respondents, 52.2% were female academic leaders whilst 47.8% of the respondents were males. A majority (52.2%) of the respondents held the position of program coordinator, while 37% of them were lecturers and the remaining (10.8%) were deans. In addition, a majority of the respondents (76.1%) had more than five years of working experience and this indicated they were experienced academic leaders. Meanwhile 23.9% of the respondents had less than five years of working experience and in this study, they were considered as novice academic leaders.

Most Frequently Used Coping Strategies among Academic Leaders

From the results displayed in Table 3, it can be seen that that the respondents in this study were rather engaged in using positive stress management coping strategies The results show that the most frequently used stress management coping strategies among the respondents was problem focused engagement (M=3.84, SD= 0.504) strategies followed by emotion focused engagement (M= 3.46, SD= 0.547) strategies. Tobin (2001) posits that through problem-focused strategies (Problem Solving, Cognitive Restructuring) and emotion-focused strategies (social support

and express emotions), a person is able to employ a dynamic and enduring negotiation by means of the stressful and tense events / surroundings. This further indicates that academic leaders in this IHL are able to manage their stress wisely and accordingly.

Within the problem focused engagement strategies, the respondents most frequently employed cognitive restructuring (M=3.89, SD= 0.497) and problem solving strategies (M=3.78, SD= 0.531). This was followed by emotion focused engagement strategies such as social support ((M= 3.54, SD= 0.671) and express emotions (M= 3.38, SD= 0.562) strategies.

Table 3: Most Frequently Used Stress Management Coping Strategies among Academic Leaders (n=46)

No.	Primary Factors	Mean	SD
1	Cognitive Restructuring	3.89	0.497
2	Problem Solving	3.78	0.531
3	Social Support	3.54	0.671
4	Express Emotions	3.38	0.562
5	Wishful Thinking	2.74	0.477
6	Problem Avoidance	2.58	0.381
7	Self-Criticism	2.46	0.508
8	Social Withdrawal	2.33	0.521
No.	Secondary Factors	Mean	SD
1	Problem Focused Engagement	3.84	0.504
2	Emotion Focused Engagement	3.46	0.547
3	Problem Focused Disengagement	2.66	0.395
4	Emotion Focused Disengagement	2.39	0.472
No.	Tertiary Factors	Mean	SD
1	Engagement	3.65	0.469
2	Disengagement	2.53	0.402

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Similar results were also observed in a study conducted by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) where the most preferred stress management coping styles used were also problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. They further added that problem-focused coping strategies involved seeking information and solving the problem whilst emotion-focused coping strategies deal with expressing and regulating emotions.

From the quantitative findings presented in Table 4, it can be seen that the respondents displayed positive stress coping constructive strategies. They acknowledged that they often tried to look at the bright side of things (M=4.09, SD=0.661) and try to make the best of what was available (M=4.07, SD= 0.772). When faced with a problem, they would try to get a new angle on the situation (M=3.96, SD=0.698), tell themselves things that help them feel better (M=3.93, SD= 0.712) and often convince themselves positively that things aren't quite as bad as they seem. (M=3.76, SD= 0.673). All these findings are reflective of the fact that the academic leaders in this IHL are engaged in a dynamic and enduring negotiation and are proficient to handle stressful settings.

Correspondingly, similar findings were also reflected in the interview sessions. A majority of the respondents interviewed admitted that as academic leaders, their jobs were rather stressful and having to solve problems and address issues were part and parcel of their everyday work. Therefore, they felt they had developed stress management and problem solving strategies. For instance, Respondent A2, a male academic leader stressed that:

> *Whenever I have a problem or am stressed out, I look at it positively and try to look at the problem from a new perspective . . . in my opinion, there is no problem that cannot be solved. . . I sometimes step back and relook or reorganize the situation or problem and sometimes I get a new perspective of things*.

Table 4: Cognitive Restructuring Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Item No	Cognitive Restructuring Items	Mean	SD
10	I look for the silver lining, so to speak; try to look on the bright side of things.	4.09	0.661
26	I look at things in a different light and try to make the best of what is available.	4.07	0.772
50	I step back from the situation and put things into perspective.	4.00	0.730
2	I try to get a new angle of a situation.	3.96	0.698
18	I tell myself things that help me feel better.	3.93	0.712
58	I reorganize the way I look at a situation, so things do not look so bad.	3.85	0.698
34	I ask myself what is really important, and discover that things are not so bad after all.	3.80	0.687
42	I convince myself that things are not quite as bad as they seem.	3.76	0.673
66	I go over the problem again and again in my mind and finally see things in a different light.	3.59	0.717

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Rather congruent thoughts were also articulated by an experienced female respondent (Respondent B2) who stressed that:

> *My job as a programme coordinator is rather stressful but over the years I have learnt to cope well. I see problems and stress as part of my life . . .when I am stressed I usually try to see the problem in a new light and tell myself that I have the confidence to solve it . . .sometimes I do let the problem or issue rest for a day or two so that I can address it when my mind is clearer.*

Both of these excerpts above show that academic leaders employ cognitive restructuring problem-solving strategies to cope with stress. When they are stressed, they would approach it in a positive manner and try to explore the problem or stress. This was well articulated by Tull (2012) when he highlighted that cognitive behavioural coping strategies have been found to be effective for a wide range of symptoms that many people in stressful situations may experience. Tull (2012, p.7) further elaborated that cognitive restructuring is a common cognitive-behavioural coping strategy as it helps us

> *... to evaluate and think about ourselves, other people, and events can have major impacts on our mood. Cognitive restructuring focuses on identifying negative thoughts or evaluations and modifying them; this may be done by gathering evidence for and against certain thoughts. By modifying our thoughts, we may be able to improve our mood and make better choices with regards to behaviours*.

Besides problem-focused engagement, the respondents also indicated favorable responses to emotion-focused engagement strategies such as social support (M=3.61) and expressing emotions (M= 3.45). Further analysis presented in Table 5 reveal those respondents when facing stressful situations would employ social support coping strategies. They would take time to talk to someone who is in a similar situation (M=3.72, SD= 0.911) or accept sympathy and understanding from someone (M=3.59, SD= 0.777). A majority also felt it would help if they talk to someone close to them (M=3.54, SD= 0.808) or find somebody who is a good listener (M=3.33, SD= 0.896).

Table 5: Social Support Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Items	Social Support Items	Mean	SD
68	I talk to someone who is in a similar situation.	3.72	0.911
28	I just spend more time with people I like.	3.67	0.944
4	I accept sympathy and understanding from someone.	3.59	0.777
60	I spend some time with friends.	3.59	0.979
52	I ask a friend or relative I respect for advice.	3.57	0.910
20	I talk to someone about how I am feeling.	3.54	0.887
36	I talk to someone that I am very close to.	3.54	0.808
44	I let my friends help out.	3.35	0.924
12	I find somebody who is a good listener.	3.33	0.896

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Table 6: Express Emotions Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Items	Express Emotions Items	Mean	SD
3	I find ways to blow off steam.	3.91	0.812
11	I do some things to get it out of my system.	3.61	0.714
27	I let out my feelings to reduce the stress.	3.50	0.983
59	I get in touch with my feelings and just let them go.	3.35	0.900
19	I let my emotions go.	3.48	0.836
35	I let my feelings out somehow.	3.41	0.748
43	I let my emotions out.	3.28	0.911
67	I am angry and really blow up.	3.00	0.989
51	My feelings are overwhelming and they just explode.	2.87	0.885

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

These views were also reflected in interviews where respondents agreed that sometimes they do "talk to their colleagues or friends" or "look for a friend to discuss the problem or issue" (Respondent B1). Furthermore, there were also instances when they would "find ways to get rid of the problem" or "discuss with my superior to help me out" (Respondent C1). During the interview session, Respondent B2 highlighted that when she is stressed she often listens to music, go for a massage or do yoga. According to Galor (2012), behavioural emotional focused coping strategies include the following: listening to music, massage, meditation, physical exercise, spending time with a friend, keeping a diary or a journal, taking a hot bath, and expressing the emotions creatively for instance by painting or having a sense of humour.

Respondents also emphasised that they do employ engaging emotion strategies (Table 6) such as going and finding ways to blow off steam (M=3.91, SD= 0.812) or do some things to get stress out of their system (M=3.61, SD= 0.714). Sometimes, they would let out their feelings to reduce the stress (M=3.50, SD= 0.983) or let their emotions go (M=3.48, SD= 0.836). Nevertheless, they admitted that they do not allow their feelings to overwhelm them (M=2.87, SD= 0.885).

Even though results in this study revealed that a majority of the respondents agreed that they applied positive engaging stress coping strategies, data also showed that at times they did apply disengagement strategies (M=2.53, SD 0.402). Results in Table 3 display that they did employ problem-focused disengagement (M=2.66, SD=0.395) and emotion-focused disengagement (M=2.39, SD=0.472) strategies. These respondents did sometimes apply problem-focused disengagement strategies such as wishful thinking (M=2.74, SD=0.477) and problem avoidance strategies (M=2.58, SD=0.381). According to Tolbin (2001), these stress coping strategies refer to "cognitive strategies that reflect an inability or reluctance to reframe or symbolically alter the situation is interrelated with the hope and wish so that the problem would be better" (p.3). Nevertheless, respondents display very little employment of emotion-focused disengagement coping strategies such as self-criticism (M=2.46, SD=0.508) and social withdrawal (M=2.33, SD=0.521) strategies. Such coping strategies show that a person is in denial of the problem and avoids the thought or action about the stressful situation or event (Tolbin, 2001).

Further details of these disengagement strategies are disclosed in Tables 7 and 8.

Data presented in Table 7 further show respondents' views on the employment of wishful coping strategies. It can be seen that they do often wish that they could have changed what happened (M= 3.48, SD= 0.863). This demonstrates that academic leaders do often reflect on what has happened and wish they could amend it later or hopefully wish that the situation could go away (M= 3.11, SD= 0.795). They also articulated that they hardly ever hope the problem would take care of itself (M=2.00, SD= 0.667) indicating that academic leaders know that problem do not disappear into think air and they try their best to deal with it effectively. This was well articulated by Respondent C2 when she said that,

> *I know that stress and problems do not disappear overnight, sooner or later we have to deal with the problem . . . so I do look at it positively and give myself time to deal with it.*

Table 7: Wishful Thinking Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Item No	Wishful Thinking Items	Mean	SD
62	I wish I could have changed what happened.	3.48	0.863
30	I wish that the situation would go away or somehow be over with.	3.11	0.795
46	I have fantasies or wishes about how things might turn out.	3.07	0.800
22	I wish that I never let myself get involved with that situation.	2.96	0.918
38	I wish that the situation had never started.	2.72	0.958
70	I think about fantastic or unreal things that make me feel better.	2.70	0.813
14	I hope a miracle will happen.	2.37	0.903
54	I hope that if I wait long enough, things would turn out OK.	2.24	0.788
6	I hope the problem would take care of itself.	2.00	0.667

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Findings exhibited in Table 8 show that respondents do at times employ some problem avoidance strategies as they do not allow the problem to get to them and hence refuse to think about it too much (M= 4.43, SD= 0.860) or just refuse to get too serious about it (M=3.20, SD=0.833). This is indicative that academic leaders are not so easily distracted by the problem and sometimes they prefer to avoid it by not thinking about it. Nevertheless, they are not disengaged and do not sleep more than usual (M= 2.15, SD= 0.988) or avoid thinking or doing anything about the situation (M= 2.15, SD= 0.842). The low mean scores also show that academic leaders do not employ problem avoidance coping strategies. They are positively engaged and look for ways to handle their stressful situations.

Table 8: Problem Avoidance Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Item No	Problem Avoidance Items	Mean	SD
29	I do not let it get to me; I refuse to think about it too much	3.43	0.860
53	I make light of the situation and refuse to get too serious about it.	3.20	0.833
37	I decide that it is really someone else's problem and not mine	2.61	0.714
21	I try to forget the whole thing.	2.48	0.781
13	I go along as if nothing was happening.	2.43	0.720
45	I avoid the person who is causing the trouble.	2.41	0.909
61	Every time I think about it I get upset; so I just stop thinking about it.	2.37	0.951
5	I sleep more than usual.	2.15	0.988
69	I avoid thinking or doing anything about the situation.	2.15	0.842

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Other disengagement coping strategies that people sometimes disengage themselves emotionally are by using self-criticism and social withdrawal coping strategies. The results of respondents' use of these strategies are shown in Tables 9 and 10.

The respondents admitted that they sometimes use self-criticism coping strategies and feel they are personally responsible for their difficulties (M=3.93, SD= 0.646) and wish they were not so careless (M=3.04, SD=0.729). Nevertheless, the results show that they are not too critical of themselves and hardly criticise themselves for what happened (M=2.35, SD=0.924) and admit they are not stupid ((M=1.83, SD=0.902). This indicates that the academic leaders can successfully cope with stressful situations as they sometimes feel they are accountable and responsible for what happened. A similar sentiment was also voiced by Respondent B1 during the interview. He explained that

> *I feel we are all sometimes responsible for the situation we are in . . .therefore we have to acknowledge the fact that perhaps we overlooked some details . . . but what is important is the fact that we have to admit our mistakes and take the necessary steps to solve the problem.*

Table 9: Self-Criticism Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Item No	Self-Criticism Items	Mean	SD
47	I realize that I am personally responsible for my difficulties and really lecture myself.	3.93	0.646
7	I tell myself that if I was not so careless, things like this would not happen.	3.04	0.729
39	Since what happened was my fault, I really chewed myself out.	2.65	0.948
15	I realize that I bring the problem on myself.	2.41	0.979
63	It was my mistake and I need to suffer the consequences.	2.37	0.771
31	I criticize myself for what happen.	2.35	0.924
55	I kick myself for letting this happen.	2.04	0.788
23	I blame myself.	2.02	0.830
71	I tell myself how stupid I am.	1.83	0.902

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Finally, some respondents did confess to the application of the disengagement coping strategy of social withdrawal (Table 10). Respondents conceded that they often do keep to themselves or try to keep their feelings to themselves (M=3.89, SD= 0.729) when facing a stressful situation or problem. Congruent findings were also revealed from interviews. For instance, Respondent A2 maintained that problems are common lifelong problems and he said that:

> *I do confess that I sometimes keep quiet or try to sweep the problem under the carpet and then there are times I just keep to myself and withdraw from friends because I do not like to share my problems but let me stress that does not happen for too long. . . I know that wishful thinking or avoidance does not make problems disappear . . . so sooner or later, I have to deal with the situation but for a while I do sometimes avoid it.*

Table 10: Social Withdrawal Strategies Employed by Academic Leaders

Item No	Social Withdrawal Item	MEAN	SD
8	I try to keep my feelings to myself.	3.89	0.729
48	I spend some time by myself.	3.30	0.866
64	I do not let my family and friends know what is going on.	2.43	0.860
56	I keep my thoughts and feelings to myself.	2.37	0.741
72	I do not let others know how I am feeling.	2.28	0.807
16	I spend more time alone.	2.15	0.842
40	I do not talk to other people about the problem.	2.11	0.795
32	I avoid being with people.	1.78	0.786
24	I avoid my family and friends.	1.52	0.623

(Scale: 1= Not at all, 2= A little, 3= Somewhat, 4= Much, 5= Very Much)

Yet findings in Table 10 show that a majority hardly withdrew from stressful situations by avoiding others such as family and friends (M= 1.52, SD= 0.623). It indicates that academic leaders stay away from social avoidance strategies when they are stressed.

CONCLUSION

Research in the field of higher education policy and management conducted by researchers such as Morris and Miller (2008), Milburn (2010) and Murphy and Curtis (2013) all reiterate that academic leaders today face many challenges related to their demanding roles and responsibilities. Campbell et al. (2007) note that besides relationship building, leaders also need to deal with conflicts at the workplace, solve problems and make effective decisions. Their jobs also demand developing people and managing limited resources and such task alongside many frequent demands contribute to leaders facing a high level of stress. This stress is further compounded with physical demands such as travel, long work hours and ever changing work environment. Goolsby (1992) proposed that the magnitude and direction of consequences of job stress are partially determined by the ability to effectively apply the right stress management coping strategies. Studies (Goolsby, 1992; Morris & Miller, 2008; Murphy & Curtis, 2013) also indicated that effective academic leaders often employ problem-focused and emotion-focused engagement coping strategies which were identified as the most successful and preferred strategies used to alleviate stress at the workplace.

Likewise, similar findings were also recorded in this study which involved academic leaders from three branch campuses at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The findings gathered from both quantitative and qualitative data also revealed that a majority of academic leaders in this study employed positive and constructive problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. They also showed highest preference for cognitive restructuring and problem solving coping strategies followed by constructivesocial and emotion focused strategies. This result is also similar with the study of Burke (2014) where he cited from previous study of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) where the most common typology of coping style includes problem focused and emotion focused coping strategies. Galor (2012) further elaborates that emotion focused coping increases the sense of pleasure, positivity and contentment in human lives and thus enables people to increase their ability to focus on that which can be changed.

Although the respondents in this study admitted to the use of some disengagement strategies such as wishful thinking, problem avoidance and self-criticism coping strategies, they acknowledge the fact that at the end of the day, they faced their problems and stressful situations and tried their best to solve their problems. Overall, the study revealed that academic leaders in this institution of higher learning in Malaysia seek to maintain a positive stance in addressing stress and difficulty at their workplace.

This study has provided some useful insights which may be beneficial to improvement in institutions of higher learning as well as practice, research, and educational policy. Campbell et al. (2007) highlight that in their study on leaders, close to 12 percent of their respondents stressed that no support was offered to employees to help them manage stress. Although the percentage is not overwhelming, it does speak of lost opportunities by organisations to assist their leaders to facilitate better stress management coping strategies. Since academic leaders are continually facing demanding tasks alongside their numerous roles and responsibilities, there is a need for organisational approaches to manage stress. Academic leaders need to equip themselves with stress management coping strategies. Henceforth, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) need to ensure the right training or specific modules are provided to academic leaders so that they can handle their stress accordingly. Besides that, organisations also need to develop support groups that can help one manage stress and stay on track.

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