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The Role of Constructive Coping Strategies in the Psychological Well-being of Military Personnel in Extreme Situations

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Abstract: *This article explores the coping strategies employed by military personnel to manage stress in extreme service conditions. The authors analyse various approaches used by servicemen and servicewomen to cope with the psychological stresses of military life, such as constant combat readiness, life-threatening situations, and separation from family. The article discusses different classifications of stress-coping strategies and evaluates their effectiveness. Special attention is given to the impact of cultural, social, and individual factors on military personnel from different countries. The authors provide a comparative analysis of coping strategies across cultures, identifying both universal and culturally specific approaches.*

Keywords: *coping strategies; military personnel; stress; psychological health; social support.*

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1. Introduction

Modern military conflicts impose not only physical but also significant psychological demands on military personnel. Living in extreme conditions, constant stress, and life-threatening situations can negatively impact mental health. Therefore, studying the mechanisms of stress adaptation and developing effective strategies to promote the psychological well-being of military personnel is of utmost importance.

The defenders of our country face daily challenges that test them both physically and mentally. Extreme conditions, constant tension, and threats to life are just a part of what military personnel encounter, but preserving mental health is crucial. How can mental health be preserved in such challenging conditions? What mechanisms help military personnel cope with stress and adapt to extreme situations? This study aims to find answers to these questions by focusing on the role of constructive coping strategies.

The role of constructive coping strategies in the psychological state of military personnel has been and continues to be studied by many domestic and foreign scientists and psychologists, such as Mushkevych & Pasichnyk (2022), Foa & Rothbaum (1998), Britt (2006), Meichenbaum (1977), and many others. They have all emphasised that the psychological resilience of military personnel is one of the key factors in the successful conduct of military operations. Understanding the mechanisms underlying adaptation to extreme conditions is an important task of modern psychology.

The issue of psychological resilience among military personnel has been significant throughout human history. Wars and conflicts have always been associated with substantial psychological stress for their participants.

The aim of this article is to:

- Examine the concept of coping strategies and their role in stressful situations.
- Identify the psychological characteristics of military service and the constructive coping strategies of military personnel.
- Determine the specific features of constructive coping strategies and conduct a comparative analysis of coping strategies among military personnel from different countries.

Within the framework of the study, an empirical investigation was conducted on the coping strategies employed by Ukrainian soldiers in extreme combat conditions. The results obtained can be used to develop effective psychological support programmes for military personnel and enhance their combat readiness.

This article on the role of constructive coping strategies in the psychological state of military personnel may be of interest to a wide range of readers:

- Military psychologists and psychiatrists: The article provides a source of scientific information and practical recommendations.
- Military personnel and veterans: It helps them better understand their psychological reactions to stress and master effective coping strategies.
- Relatives and loved ones of military personnel: The article can help them understand the experiences of their loved ones and provide appropriate support.
- For academic purposes: It serves as material for scientific research and educational programmes.
- For program developers: It provides guidance for creating psychological assistance programmes for military personnel and their families.

2. The Concept of Coping Strategies and Their Role in Stressful Situations

Military service is associated with constant stress caused by extreme conditions, life-threatening danger, and separation from family. To successfully adapt to such conditions, military personnel use various coping strategies — ways to deal with stress. In this article, we will explore how these strategies work, what types exist, and how they affect the mental health of military personnel.

Each of us has faced stressful situations at least once in life. These can be both everyday difficulties and serious life challenges. In such moments, coping strategies come to our aid — various ways through which we can cope with stress, preserve mental health, and adapt to new conditions.

Coping strategies are a set of psychological and behavioural responses to stressful situations. They help us manage stress, maintain mental health, and adapt to new conditions. Coping strategies are especially important for military personnel who are constantly exposed to extreme situations (Zhuravlova et al., 2020).

Coping strategies can be classified according to various criteria, but they are most often divided into active and passive types. Active strategies are aimed at changing the situation or one's reaction to it. These include actions such as seeking information, problem-solving, and seeking help from others. Passive strategies are aimed at avoiding the situation or escaping from the problem. They may include actions like denying the problem, distraction, and self-isolation.

The most common strategies include interacting with family, friends, and colleagues to feel supported and reduce stress. Regular physical activity promotes the production of endorphins — the "happiness hormones" that help reduce tension. Meditation, breathing exercises, and yoga help to calm down and restore internal balance.

According to Andrushenko (2018), "The choice of constructive coping strategies is a key factor in preserving the mental health of military personnel. Regular use of these strategies helps reduce stress and anxiety levels, improve mood and general well-being, increase resilience to stress, reduce the risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental disorders, and improve quality of life." Coping strategies impact our bodies at various levels:

Physiological level: Through relaxation techniques and physical exercises, we reduce the level of stress hormones (cortisol) and increase the level of endorphins, hormones of pleasure.

Psychological level: Changing thought patterns, focusing on the positive, and seeking support help alter our perception of the stressful situation and reduce anxiety levels.

Social level: Interacting with others and receiving support helps us feel less isolated and improves self-esteem.

Kokun et al. (2021) believe that effective coping strategies help preserve physical and mental health, reduce the risk of developing various stress-related diseases. Thanks to coping strategies, we can better deal with difficult situations and feel happier and more satisfied with life. The ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with others helps us feel supported and loved."

Coping strategies play an important role in the adaptation of military personnel to extreme conditions. The choice of constructive strategies helps preserve mental health, improve the effectiveness of fulfilling duties, and enhance overall quality of life.

3. Psychological Features of Military Service and Constructive Coping Strategies for Military Personnel

Military service is a unique type of activity associated with a high degree of responsibility, constant combat readiness, and being in extreme conditions. These characteristics define the special physical and psychological stresses that military personnel experience.

The physical stress of military personnel is significant and includes high physical activity (long marches, training, and preparation for combat operations require considerable physical effort), sleep deprivation (shifts, night operations, and constant readiness to respond lead to chronic fatigue), unpleasant conditions (being in field conditions, carrying heavy equipment, limited hygiene facilities), and the risk of injury during training, combat, or accidents.

The psychological stress of military service is no less important than the physical one. This includes constant readiness for extreme situations, responsibility for the lives of others, and uncertainty about the future — all of which are strong stressors. Fear for one's life and the lives of comrades, fear of the unknown, prolonged separation from family and friends, and limited

opportunities for social communication are also powerful stress factors. Participation in combat operations and witnessing human suffering can lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

It is important to understand that the physical and psychological stresses of military service are closely interconnected. For example, physical fatigue can worsen mood and increase anxiety, while psychological stress can reduce physical endurance. This combination of factors can lead to the development of various psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety disorders, PTSD, sleep disorders, and issues with alcohol and drugs. PTSD is a prolonged and severe disorder that develops as a result of experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. Symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the trauma (memories, nightmares, intense psychological reactions to triggers reminding one of the trauma), active avoidance of situations, places, people, or thoughts related to the trauma, changes in thinking and mood: feelings of detachment, a sense that the world is dangerous, negative emotions such as anger, fear, shame, increased arousal, problems falling asleep, irritability, difficulty concentrating, heightened sensitivity to sound or touch (Tytarenko & Dvornik, 2022).

Among service members, depression can arise due to prolonged stress, feelings of helplessness, and a loss of meaning in life. Military personnel may develop anxiety disorders such as persistent fear of various aspects of life, dizziness, and irrational fear of certain objects or situations.

In addition to extreme situations, the development of these disorders may be influenced by factors such as the duration and intensity of the traumatic event, previous mental health disorders, social support (lack of social support increases the risk of mental disorders), and personality traits.

The treatment of psychological consequences from extreme situations includes cognitive-behavioural therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, and EMDR — effective treatments for PTSD, medication (antidepressants, antipsychotics, and tranquilisers may be used to treat depression, anxiety disorders, and other symptoms), and social support (it is important that those who have experienced trauma can communicate with others who have had similar experiences).

As Kozlovskaya (2018) notes, "To prevent the development of psychological consequences of extreme situations, it is important to provide timely psychological assistance, facilitate social adaptation, reduce physical and psychological stress, promote the development of coping strategies, and teach people effective ways of dealing with stress."

The combination of physical and psychological stress can lead to the development of various psychological problems. Therefore, it is important to provide military personnel with the necessary psychological support and develop effective rehabilitation programmes.

4. Features of Constructive Coping Strategies

Constructive coping strategies are healthy and effective methods that help individuals manage stress and difficult life situations. They support mental health, improve quality of life, and enable the achievement of set goals. Military personnel face a unique set of stress factors that require specific coping mechanisms.

Military personnel are trained to quickly and effectively analyse situations. This skill helps them identify key challenges and develop action plans. Developing a clear plan of action gives soldiers a sense of control over the situation, reducing anxiety. Instead of passively waiting for things to resolve, they take active steps to solve problems. The ability to quickly adapt to changing conditions and adjust plans is an important characteristic of successful soldiers.

Military personnel often operate in environments where teamwork is vital. This fosters strong social bonds and mutual support. Soldiers are ready to help one another, which creates a sense of unity and solidarity. More and more service members are not afraid to seek professional help, recognising the importance of mental health support.

Even in the most challenging situations, soldiers try to find positive moments that can motivate them to continue fighting. From negative experiences, soldiers try to draw useful lessons

that will help them in the future. A strong belief in themselves and their comrades helps military personnel overcome difficulties and achieve set goals.

As Grimm (2013) notes, "these strategies are especially important for military personnel because they are constantly under the influence of stresses that require them to find effective ways to cope. Service members often face uncertainty about the future, which requires them to adapt to changes."

Constructive coping strategies are key to maintaining the mental health and effectiveness of military personnel. Developing these strategies is a critical task not only for soldiers but also for commanders and psychologists. This will help military personnel better manage stress, increase resilience, and improve efficiency.

Nerubasska, Palshkov, & Maksymchuk (2020) believe that the choice of coping strategies by military personnel is a complex process dependent on many factors. Understanding these factors helps develop more effective support programmes for service members dealing with stress and traumatic events.

Previous experience in stress management influences the choice of strategies in the future. The presence of mental health disorders or trauma can limit the selection of available strategies. Having a strong social network promotes the use of social coping strategies. Military personnel often rely on support from their comrades. The climate within a unit, as well as the attitudes of commanders towards subordinates, also influence strategy choices. The presence of psychologists and access to professional help encourage more adaptive strategies.

Melnyk et al. (2019) suggest that cultural values and norms may influence how stress is perceived and which strategies are chosen. Religious beliefs can provide additional support and meaning in life, which may impact coping strategies. The social role of military personnel can also influence strategy choices, as certain behaviours are expected of them."

These factors interact with each other and affect the selection of coping strategies. For instance, a soldier with high self-esteem, strong social support, and a culture that encourages action is more likely to use problem-focused strategies. All these factors should be considered to be effective. An individualised approach, taking into account each person's characteristics, allows for the development of the most effective support strategies.

Constructive coping strategies play an important role in maintaining the mental health of service members, especially during high-stress and traumatic events. Using such strategies allows military personnel to cope with difficulties more effectively, reduce anxiety and depression levels, and increase overall life satisfaction.

Actively using constructive strategies helps reduce the intensity of stress reactions, contributing to the preservation of physical and mental health. Using positive coping mechanisms enhances mood and reduces anxiety and depression. Successfully employing constructive coping strategies boosts self-esteem and self-confidence. Many coping strategies involve seeking social support, which strengthens social bonds and a sense of belonging. Regular use of constructive coping strategies helps military personnel better adapt to new conditions and challenges. Utilising these strategies is an effective preventive measure against PTSD, depression, and other mental health issues.

Military personnel can be taught to use constructive coping strategies through specialised training programmes aimed at developing effective stress management skills, creating support groups where service members can share experiences and support each other, individual psychological consultations to develop personal strategies for coping with stress, and informational campaigns about the importance of mental health and accessible support.

5. Empirical Study: Interviews with Military Personnel on Coping Strategies in Extreme Situations

As part of the research, an empirical study was conducted to explore the coping strategies used by Ukrainian soldiers in extreme combat conditions. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms involved in managing stress under conditions of life-threatening danger, physical exhaustion, and moral strain.

Participants

The sample included 20 active servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine aged between 20 and 50, who participated directly in combat operations in eastern and southern Ukraine from 2022 to 2025. The participants represented various military branches (infantry, artillery, reconnaissance, and medical service), which made it possible to compare coping specifics depending on the soldier's role in combat situations.

Methodology

The interviews were conducted using a pre-developed semi-structured protocol, which included the following thematic blocks:

- personal experience of extreme situations;
- conscious and unconscious coping strategies;
- the role of support from comrades, leadership, and family;
- the significance of faith, humour, rituals, and professional training.

Results

Analysis of the responses revealed that soldiers most frequently used adaptive coping strategies, including:

- **problem-focused coping** (task execution, action planning, strict adherence to instructions);
- **emotion-focused strategies**, among which the leading roles were played by:
 - humour as a psychological defence, often in the form of dark humour;
 - faith in a higher power, serving as a source of inner stability;
 - distraction (e.g., memories of family, thoughts about the future);
 - support from comrades, which respondents described as “the strongest survival resource.”

Some less effective coping strategies were also identified, including temporary emotional detachment or suppression of emotions. While these reduce tension in the moment, they contribute to cumulative psychological exhaustion over time.

An interesting observation was the recognition of the importance of rituals (repetitive actions before battle or upon returning from missions) as a way to create an illusion of control and stability amid chaotic conditions. It was also found that psychological training has a significant impact on the effectiveness of coping strategies.

Conclusions

The results indicate that soldiers' coping behaviour is multifaceted, encompassing both individual psychological resources and various social factors. Understanding the nature of these strategies will guide the development of psychological training and rehabilitation programmes for military personnel.

6. Comparative Analysis of Coping Strategies of Military Personnel from Different Countries

Coping strategies, which determine how individuals deal with stress and adversity, play an important role in the lives of military personnel. These strategies help maintain mental health in high-stress environments, traumatic events, and periods of uncertainty. However, coping strategies may differ depending on the cultural, historical, and social characteristics of different countries.

There are many factors that influence the differences in coping strategies among military personnel from various countries. Culture affects the perception of stress, emotional expression, and the preferred methods of coping. Historical events such as wars and revolutions shape the typical coping mechanisms of a society. The level of social support provided to military personnel and their families also affects the choice of coping strategies.

As Horgan & Maclachlan (2004) explain, "Religion can provide additional support and a sense of purpose, which influences coping styles. Socio-economic factors such as standard of living, education, and access to healthcare can either limit or expand the possibilities of using various coping strategies. Every country has its own unique military culture, which influences the values, behavioural norms, and expectations of its military personnel".

In Western countries, individual strategies are commonly used, such as psychotherapy, relaxation techniques, and physical exercises. There is strong social support among military personnel and their families. Countries with long military histories, such as France, the United Kingdom, and Germany, have well-established psychological support systems and stress-coping training for soldiers. European countries are characterised by a more individualistic approach, with a focus on personal responsibility, in contrast to Southern European countries, which tend to emphasise more collectivist values. The level of social support offered to military personnel and their families varies from country to country, with each country having its own unique military culture that influences values, behavioural norms, and expectations.

Most Eastern cultures are collectivist, meaning they focus more on the group, family, and community than on the individual. This is reflected in the choice of coping strategies, which often involve seeking support from family, friends, and the community. Philosophical teachings prevalent in many Eastern countries shape specific attitudes towards life, death, and suffering, which impact the choice of coping strategies. Historical events such as wars, revolutions, and natural disasters also influence coping mechanisms in society.

In countries with high levels of violence, survival, aggression, and avoidance strategies may predominate in response to the pervasive threat. The longer the conflict lasts, the more soldiers adapt to the stressful conditions, developing more sophisticated coping mechanisms. High-intensity combat often exacerbates post-traumatic disorders, making the use of more effective coping strategies essential. The choice of coping strategies is also influenced by the level of social support provided to military personnel and their families. Cultural values and norms affect the perception of stress and the selection of coping strategies. Religion can provide additional support and meaning, influencing methods of coping with stress.

As noted by Chmitorz et al. (2018), "a systematic comparative analysis of coping strategies among military personnel from different countries is a complex task and requires a large amount of empirical data." However, some general trends can be identified. Despite cultural differences, there are universal coping strategies that are effective for military personnel from various countries, such as social support, physical activity, and relaxation techniques.

Military personnel from different cultures may use different languages to describe their experiences, prefer different types of social support, and have different expectations regarding the effectiveness of various strategies. Military culture shapes specific coping mechanisms that help soldiers survive and perform their duties effectively.

In different countries around the world, soldiers apply various strategies to cope with stress resulting from participation in combat operations or service under high-threat conditions. Empirical studies confirm national characteristics of these approaches, which are shaped by cultural, social, and institutional factors.

As noted by Flood & Richard (2022), in the United States (Army, Navy, Marine Corps), the most important coping strategies include both problem-focused and emotion-focused approaches. The former includes planning, active problem-solving, and seeking social support. The latter encompasses the use of humour and religion, as well as seeking psychological help. Systematic mental health programmes, such as resilience training, play a crucial role, along with a general

openness among soldiers to psychotherapeutic support. According to the PTSD Foundation (2018), more than 60% of American soldiers used positive coping strategies. However, among veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, a high level of avoidant coping was observed, particularly among those who did not seek help.

In Ukraine (Armed Forces of Ukraine, ATO/JFO veterans, soldiers during the full-scale invasion), coping strategies are characterised by mutual support among comrades, the use of humour and religion, and a focus on military duty. A widely practised approach is the so-called “social coping” - collective interaction and unit cohesion as a resource for psychological stability. This approach is partly explained by the lack of a stable psychological assistance system and the traumatic experiences of both military personnel and civilians. According to a study by the Ukrainian Institute for the Future (2022), 71% of Ukrainian soldiers used humour as their most important defence mechanism. Additionally, they frequently turn to volunteers as an alternative source of emotional support.

In the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), primary coping strategies include cognitive restructuring, discipline, religious reflection, and short-term emotional techniques. High levels of mobilisation, a strong sense of national duty, and a cohesive military culture play a significant role. Empirical data, including a study by Ben-Gurion University (2015), indicate that Israeli soldiers exhibit the highest level of self-control compared to soldiers from four other countries (USA, Israel, Germany, Italy).

In Germany (Bundeswehr, 2019), rational coping strategies predominate, involving consultation with professional psychotherapists and participation in reintegration programmes after completing overseas missions. These strategies are supported by the country’s strong social system and institutional backing. According to Bundeswehr (2019), 35% of soldiers who participated in peacekeeping missions positively assessed the effectiveness of group psychotherapy.

Thus, the analysis of stress-coping strategies among soldiers from different countries shows that their structure depends both on individual characteristics and on the national context: the development level of mental health systems, cultural traditions, and the nature of warfare.

7. Conclusions

The article highlights the crucial role of constructive coping strategies in maintaining the mental health of military personnel in extreme conditions. The analysis of scientific literature and international experience led to several conclusions.

Military personnel employ a wide range of coping strategies to manage stress. Cultural differences significantly influence the choice of coping strategies. Soldiers from different cultures may use various ways of coping with stress, which should be considered when developing psychological support programmes.

Seeking help from a psychologist or psychiatrist is an effective way to deal with psychological difficulties. Since every member of the military personnel is an individual, the choice of coping strategies should be personalised, considering personal characteristics, cultural context, and the specific situation.

In this article, we examined the concept of coping strategies and their role in stressful situations, identified the psychological features of military service and constructive coping strategies for military personnel, defined the characteristics of constructive coping strategies, and conducted a comparative analysis of coping strategies among military personnel from different countries.

The results of the empirical study indicate that soldiers’ coping behaviour is multifaceted and encompasses both individual psychological resources and social factors.

Maintaining the mental health of military personnel in extreme conditions can be achieved by creating programmes aimed at developing coping skills, tailored to cultural differences and individual needs. This can be done through information campaigns among military personnel and their commanders about the importance of mental health and available support options, as well as

by forming mutual support networks within the military, where soldiers can share experiences and support one another.

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