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Developing Crisis Coping Strategies using Nominal Group Technique for Psychological Distress Management

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Abstract
This article solicits the opinions of seven professionals in the field of mental health in order to provide solutions for dealing with psychological crises through the application of the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). Four expert-approved approaches received acceptance scores between 90.48% and 100%. NGT facilitated quick and reliable validation of elements derived from literature reviews and expert consultations. Those working on individualised therapy modules for mental illness should be involved in future studies aimed at improving these approaches.

Keywords: Nominal Group Technique; Crisis; Psychological Distress; Self-Coping Strategies

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1.0 Introduction
The Malaysian government strongly emphasises mental health due to its critical role in total well-being (Sohana Abdul Hamid, 2019). Psychiatric problems like sadness, anxiety, restlessness, and stress might emerge in times of unexpected stress (Samsiah Mohd Jais, 2008). When someone is in the midst of a crisis, their mental, emotional, physical, and behavioural states undergo profound changes, leading to symptoms including disorientation, dread, worry, and altered behaviour. Notably, a person's physical and mental well-being can be negatively impacted by crises, which can originate from various sources such as the economy, politics, nature, health, or personal life, and they can strike at any age. According to Samsiah Mohd Jais (2020), there are usually three stages to how people react to crises: the acute phase, when their physiological and psychological reactions are overwhelming; the outward adjustment phase, when they try to regain control and may engage in daily activities or withdraw socially; and the integration phase, where they process the crisis, overcome guilt and stop blaming themselves. Untreated crises can profoundly affect mental health, influencing one's thoughts, emotions, behaviour, and social interactions (Abdul Aziz. A. et al., 2020; Ang Shu Qing, 2021). Furthermore, a critical time for academic and personal development, postgraduate studies also bring their own set of difficulties and stresses, some of which might cause mental health issues (Kumar & Feldman, 2020). Academic and personal crises can significantly influence students' mental health as they face the challenges of higher education (Abdullah & Elias, 2018). In light of these difficulties, it is critical for graduate students to learn and use healthy coping mechanisms in order to alleviate emotional pain and build resilience (Bennett et al., 2019).

Postgraduate students may experience increased stress levels due to academic crises, such as impending deadlines, complex research assignments, and expectations to do exceptionally well (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Further contributing to psychological

discomfort in this population are personal crises, such as relationship challenges, financial concerns, and health problems (Mason et al., 2020). Psychological issues like depression, anxiety, and stress are severe among university students (Vasugi & Norlizah, 2019 In Malaysia, 30% of those seeking treatment for emotional disorders are 16 and older (Sherina et al., 2003: Hassan et al. 2018). Despite counselling and psychological support, these issues persist and worsen. The World Health Organization projected depression to be the second leading cause of disability worldwide by 2020. Over 40% of university students report severe depression (Shun Sun Wong et al., 2023; Teymoor & Sanaz, 2011), influenced by stressors such as relocation, academic pressure, and financial problems (Habibah et al., 2011; Mohammad Mofatteh, 2020). High stress levels can lead to suicidal ideation, self-abuse, and poor academic performance (Chen Honglin et al., 2009; Franca Obiageli Okechukwu et al., 2022). Thus, understanding and addressing students' psychological well-being is crucial for academic success and overall health.

Therefore, this research objective in this study is identify the most effective methods for graduate students to manage crisis and psychological distress when facing crises or events and to gather a solution based on the opinions and suggestions of experts by reviewing their work.

2.0 Literature Review

An individual is considered to be in the midst of a crisis when they are faced with a situation that is too overwhelming for their current level of self-sufficiency to handle (Everly & Mitchell, 1999). More specifically, a crisis can be defined as an individual's reaction to an external stimulus that disrupts their internal psychological balance, the inability of their typical self-coping mechanism to counteract this disruption, and the subsequent decline in their ability to function independently (Caplan, 1964). Another definition of a crisis is an extremely challenging perspective or event that becomes unbearable due to factors beyond the control of the individual (Gilland & James, 1988, cited in Kanel, 2012). On the other hand, according to Gerald Caplan (1961), a crisis is an ongoing challenge that cannot be solved through conventional means. Meanwhile, as per Kanel (2012), an individual's crisis development process can be observed in Figure 1.
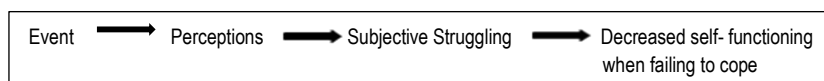

Fig. 1: Formula for the Crisis Formation Process

The degree to which an individual can confront adversity is directly proportional to that degree, asserts Kanel (2012). According to Faberow and Gordon (1981), cited in Samsiah Mohd Jais (2020), a crisis progresses through four distinct phases: the heroic, honeymoon, disillusionment, and reconstruction phases. The moment a person undergoes a catastrophic event, this heroic phase begins. They are under much stress at the moment, yet they will do everything it takes to protect themselves and their possessions. The next stage is the "honeymoon phase," when people who have overcome a traumatic occurrence begin to feel secure, confident, appreciative, and grateful for their life as they are. People in this stage are often considered in a good position to return to their regular lives. However, people may start to feel let down as early as three or four weeks following the traumatic occurrence when they begin to realise that something horrible has happened. People going through a crisis have symptoms, including disorientation and immobility during this stage. Moreover, during this stage, individuals may experience a range of emotions, including anger, frustration, despair, self-blame, and a sense of destiny, as if the horrific event has only just started. Thus, crisis intervention is vital at this stage to guide and transport crisis individuals from the disappointment phase to the reconstruction phase. At last, the rebuilding phase is when people who have been through a crisis are able to return to their normal lives, whether that is through self-care, outside support, or a combination of these factors. Consequently, individuals experiencing a crisis require prompt action, such as early intervention, to lessen the severity of the crisis and its symptoms. This will allow them to regain adaptive function and lessen the impact of psychological trauma (Everly, Flannery & Mitchell, 2000).

In order to recognise people in crisis and assist them in returning to stability, it is necessary to have a firm grasp of the three main aspects of a crisis. What follows are the parts:
1) What actually transpired;
2) One's own interpretation of the incident;
3) The typical self-mechanism is unable to handle the decline in level functionality compared to before the occurrence.

As a result, crisis intervention primarily aims to help people get back to normal functioning, alter their perspective on what happened, and develop better coping mechanisms to recover (Kanel, 2012).

2.1 Coping Mechanisms

Coping involves efforts to manage or tolerate stress-related threats and demands exceeding personal capacity. It is categorized into emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. Emotion-focused coping aims to alleviate negative emotions such as stress and frustration, with positive methods including religious practices like reciting prayers and studying sacred texts (Noornajihan & Nuraini, 2020). Conversely, negative emotion-focused coping involves harmful behaviours such as smoking or overeating. Previous research suggests that students who attempt to manage stress more effectively can reduce its negative impact. For example, several studies indicate that highly motivated students are more likely to use problem-focused coping strategies and achieve better grades, whereas less motivated students may resort to emotion-focused coping and obtain lower grades (Choia, Lee, Yoo & Ko, 2019; Lee, 2017).

Abdul Rashid (2020) outlines various strategies like time management and emergency planning as effective coping methods to reduce psychological distress, while Abdul Rashid & Nurun Najihah (2023) also identify five key strategies to cope with crisis: effective communication, emotional regulation, religious concepts, a good support system, and interpersonal trust. Ukeh and Hassan (2018) also studied how coping strategies impact the psychological well-being of university students in Nigeria. Their study revealed that cognitive restructuring has the most significant influence on student well-being. While problem-solving and social support are associated with psychological well-being, they do not predict it. Conversely, coping methods such as cognitive restructuring, problem avoidance, hopeful thinking, self-criticism, and social withdrawal negatively impact students' psychological well-being. Similarly, Melissa Edora Sanu and Balan Rathakrishnan (2019) identified three coping strategy domains that positively influence students' psychological well-being: cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, and social support.

Postgraduate students should apply these strategies to manage psychological stress effectively. These coping mechanisms not only help in handling stress but also serve as intermediaries in reducing crisis levels and psychological symptoms. The evidence indicates that both positive and negative coping approaches are significant in addressing crises (Abdul Rashid, 2020; Abdul Rashid & Nurun Najihah, 2023).

3.0 Methodology
The study used the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) method as its principal research methodology. The study included a panel of seven experts who specialise in student mental health and psychology. Due to the current impracticality of collecting experts in person, researchers conduct NGT sessions online utilising Google Meet. The session lasted 2 hours, and a panel of experts convened to conduct a brainstorming session using the NGT approach to collect ideas and solutions based on their professional opinions. At the conclusion of the session, the researcher performed a precise calculation utilising the NGT approach to produce data that addressed the objectives of this study.

3.1 Sampling
The study employed a cohort of seven proficient individuals specialising in educational management. This quantity is adequate to ensure that the sample utilised is specialised and does not necessitate a substantial amount. The NGT can be implemented with either a small cohort or a big group (Lomax & McLeman, 1984; Dobbie et al., 2004; Mustapha et al., 2022). Alternatively, it can be subdivided into smaller clusters to enhance efficient communication based on the particular requirements of the research. Horton (1980) suggested that the sample size should range from 7 to 10 individuals. However, Harvey and Holmes (2012) argued that a sample size between 6 and 12 is adequate for implementing the NGT process.

3.2 NGT techniques step
NGT is a systematic process used to establish a collective agreement among a group of individuals over a specific matter. The notion was initially developed as a method for engaging in social planning situations, as defined by Delbecq, Van De Ven, and Gustafson in 1975. These situations encompass exploratory research, public engagement, the involvement of interdisciplinary experts, and the evaluation of suggestions. Since then, it has been employed in other group settings, including empirical studies in the field of social science. O'Neil and Jackson (1983), Lomax and McLeman (1984), and MacPhail (2001) are among the researchers who have employed it in the field of education. However, its usage appears to be more prevalent in health research.

The NGT is a meticulously organised procedure comprising four clearly defined stages: (1) Spontaneous creation of thoughts in reaction to a prompt query. (2) Sharing and enumerating these thoughts in a round-robin fashion without engaging in conversation. (3) Elucidation of each concept and categorisation of analogous concepts. (4) Each person will vote to determine the order of importance of the ideas. In order to promote genuine outcomes and active participation, it is essential that voting remains anonymous and adheres to the aforementioned principles. Note that NGT ensures lasting documentation of the group's procedure and results by meticulously transcribing all recommendations and authorised modifications onto flipchart sheets. Hence, presenting these documents is a commendable approach to educating individuals who were absent for all or part of a gathering, and it also enables groups to resume their discussions from where they left off in the previous meeting (Fox, 1989; Mustapha et al., 2022).

4.0 Findings

Table 1: Overall Data Coping Strategies in Dealing with Crisis and Psychological Distress Among Post Graduate Students

| Items / Elements	Voter1	Voter2	Voter3	Voter4	Voter5	Voter6	Voter7	Total item score	Percentage	Rank Priority	Voter Consensus
Mindfulness, breathing, and gratitude	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	19	90.48	3	Suitable
Body scan and relaxation	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	100	1	Suitable
Meditation and emotional regulation	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	20	95.24	2	Suitable
Acceptance and trauma symptom	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	21	100	1	Suitable
Support from significant others	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	19	90.48	3	Suitable
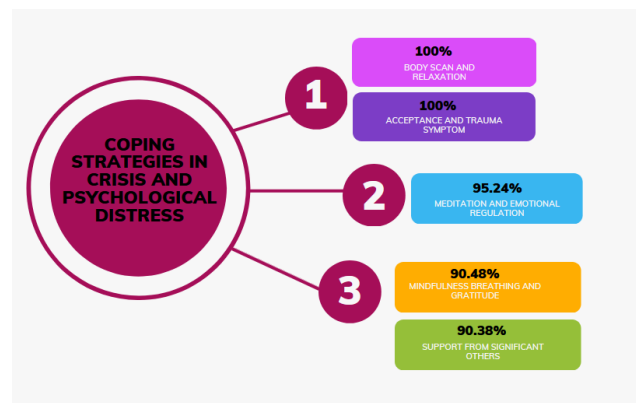
Fig. 1: Coping strategies ranking

The research has proven that all concentrations of the model construct are within the optimal range. Based on the results of these investigations, the proportion must now exceed 70 per cent. The study results and expert approval statistics indicate that all issues have a consensus of over 70 per cent among experts. Deslandes, Mendes, Pires, and Campos (2010) and Mustapha et al. (2022) are among the several studies that corroborate this idea. Based on this, the researchers might infer that the fundamental characteristics of the model are functional and positively received by the intended audience. Hence, the modified NGT methodology is an efficient substitute for the extensive cycles of expert evaluation required in the Delphi method.

Based on the results displayed, this element is obtained based on the experience of 7 experts in the field of psychology, counseling and mental health who are experienced in handling crisis cases. Elements of body scan, relaxation, acceptance and trauma symptoms ranked highest at 100%, followed by meditation and emotion regulation at 95.24%. Breathing awareness, gratitude and support from others ranked third at 90.48%. These five elements are effective. in reducing the level of crisis.

5.0 Discussion

Living a regular life can be challenging for someone whose thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are affected by a mental illness. The development of spiritual diseases has the potential to impede Islamic civilisation's advancement. Mental health is receiving top priority from the government due to its growing impact on national development.

According to the data in Table 1, postgraduate students have various coping mechanisms at their disposal for dealing with stressful situations and emotional pain. Mindfulness, meditation, and relaxation techniques are examples of individual practices, while social support mechanisms are also part of the strategies that have been assessed.

1. Body Scan and Relaxation and Acceptance and Trauma Symptom strategies both achieved perfect scores, highlighting the crucial function of relaxation and acceptance procedures in reducing psychological distress through high-effectiveness relaxation techniques. These methods seem to work for everyone; therefore, interventions should focus on them.

2. Emotional Regulation and Meditation: These practices had a slightly lower score than the best methods. However, they were still quite helpful. This suggests that learning to control one's emotions via meditation is crucial for dealing with difficult situations.

3. Though they are not quite as successful as the top strategies, Mindfulness Breathing, Gratitude, and Support from Significant Others (the third role of mindfulness and social support) are still quite significant. Both mindfulness practices and having a support system are essential in managing psychological discomfort, as these methods suggest.

4. General Accord on Appropriateness: The fact that all techniques were deemed "Suitable" by the voters suggests that they are in full accord regarding the effectiveness of these methods. This agreement further proves that these tactics are reliable ways for graduate students to cope.

The same holds true for postgraduate students: excellent mental health is essential to their success and to society's advancement. There are a number of strategies that can be put into place to lessen the prevalence of mental health issues and, in the end, guarantee that self-development is successful. We can only learn to adapt to new circumstances if we do that. According to the data presented in Table 1 and Linear Graph 1, a different approach may be necessary to restore mental wellness. Notably, reducing the prevalence of crises and psychological symptom disorders is one of the goals of this strategy. In order to be resilient in times of disaster, it is crucial to focus on internal, spiritual, and relationship-based support components. From a traditional psychological and even Islamic perspective, there are numerous instances where this has been effective. Consequently, this is the best way to combat the rapidly expanding epidemic of mental disease. Finally, the evidence reveals that postgraduate students can effectively manage crises and psychological distress when they combine individual relaxation and mindfulness practices with the assistance of important individuals. The mental health support programs at educational institutions could benefit from including these tactics to help their pupils.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, it can be concluded that there are various effective techniques that are used as coping strategies in managing crises and psychological stress that are highlighted. Those strategies include body scan and relaxation, acceptance and management of trauma

symptoms, meditation and emotion regulation, breathing and mindfulness gratitude, and support from significant others. Each method offers a different approach to dealing with stress and mental health challenges, emphasizing the importance of a holistic and multifaceted approach to well-being.

However, there are some recommendations that can be highlighted for future researchers. Future researchers should evaluate the effectiveness of various coping strategies across different populations through comparative and longitudinal studies, focusing on methods like body scan relaxation and mindfulness practices. Additionally, exploring personalized interventions, digital tools, and social support networks can enhance these strategies. Investigating cultural adaptability, underlying mechanisms, and implementation barriers is crucial for accessibility and effectiveness. Qualitative research is needed to gain deeper insights, and the findings provide foundational elements for developing future modules. These modules can guide future efforts to address psychological distress effectively.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study is one response to the need. It is starting point for this study is that to identify the coping mechanism use for postgraduate students when they are in psychological distress which involve both long term and short term in phase of crisis. Therefore, the perspective obtained from this finding should be used as the first step to any attempt to study new constructs, new samples, and the construction of new models or modules in improving the coping ability of an individual during a crisis. At the end of reading this paper, the results contribution some preliminary finding to be growing to the field. Even if you are critical of some of the expression or the ways in which the argument has been put together, you are left in no doubt about what you will find in the paper and why the authors say you need to know about it. The potential contribution is clear. The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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