Stress Coping Strategies of Young Soldiers in the Context of the Deteriorating Security Situation

Eva ŠTĚPÁNKOVÁ[1]*, Kristýna BINKOVÁ[2], Miroslav MAŠLEJ[3]

[1, 2, 3]*Department of Resources Management, Faculty of Military Leadership, University of Defence, Kounicova 65, 662 10, Brno, Czech Republic*

Correspondence *eva.stepankova@unob.cz

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to investigate how military students perceive and feel about the deteriorating security situation within the context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Additionally, it aims to identify their coping responses and strategies associated with the conflict. The quantitative research design was employed, specifically utilizing a standardized Brief COPE inventory. The data for this study was collected in 2024. The sample consists of 178 military students from the Faculty of Military Leadership of the University of Defence in the Czech Republic. The results indicate that young military students perceive the security situation as serious and believe it will affect their future careers. However, the security situation does not cause them significant stress, and they do not report significantly high levels of any of the coping strategies offered. To the highest extent, the students declare especially the application of the following strategies – Acceptance, Planning, and Humor.

KEY WORDS: *Stress-coping strategies; Military; Soldiers; Russia-Ukraine conflict; Brief COPE inventory.*

1. Introduction

The military profession inherently carries a significant level of stress due to the diverse range of challenging situations that individuals encounter, even during times of peace. However, the stress intensifies during times of war and conflict. This affects not only soldiers directly engaged in combat but also those in active duty who are not directly involved in combat, as well as cadets (military students) preparing for their future roles.

In February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine conflict (RUC) erupted, plunging Europe into a war-torn state after many decades of peace. The security situation in NATO countries, particularly those in Eastern Europe, has significantly deteriorated due to this intervention.

Aside from the Ukrainian population directly impacted by the conflict, individuals living in other nations have also experienced its effects. For instance, in countries sharing geographical, historical, economic, and cultural ties with Russia and Ukraine, there is a natural development of deep emotions and concerns regarding potential involvement in the war. Moreover, individuals in countries lacking such connections with Russia and Ukraine have also observed the war's significance through media coverage. Consequently, insecurity among the entire population has heightened, resulting in increased stress levels. For instance, the findings of the study by Chudzicka-Czupała et al. [1] indicate that even residents not directly involved in the war experience higher levels of stress.

Lazarus [2] proposed that stress involves three distinct processes. The first process, known as *primary appraisal*, involves recognizing a perceived threat to oneself. *Secondary appraisal*, the second process, involves considering potential responses to the identified threat. *Coping*, the third process, refers to the execution of the chosen response. [3] *Coping strategies* have been demonstrated to serve as protective measures against the impacts of stress on both physical and psychological well-being, and the strategies used are often a reflection of the appraisal process. [4]

In recent decades, interest has increased significantly in the mechanisms individuals employ to cope with stress. Coping strategies can be categorized in various ways, including *adaptive* and *maladaptive* or *problem-focused*, *emotion-focused* and *avoidant* stress coping strategies. [5, 6]

In this paper, the authors focus on a specific target group directly impacted by the threat of RUC – soldiers, particularly first-year and second-year military students of the Czech Republic's sole military school – the University of

Defence, who in addition to the stress of war, must contend with the challenges of acclimating to military life. [7] The paper aims to identify and describe their coping responses and strategies connected with the RUC. Several tools are available for measuring and detecting stress-coping strategies. The authors employ the questionnaire method, utilizing the *Brief COPE inventory*.

However, to assess stress coping strategies, it is first necessary to determine how military students perceive and feel about the deteriorating situation. Therefore, the research questions are as follows:

- How do young military students perceive the deteriorating security situation and its potential impact on their future careers?
- What coping strategies do young military students utilize to navigate the security situation within the RUC?

2. Theoretical Background

A study conducted by Kurapov et al. [8] examined the psychological effects of RUC on Ukrainian university students and staff. 97.8% of participants experienced worsened mental and emotional states, marked by increased levels of depression, loneliness, nervousness, and anger. These findings align with those of Stadnik et al. [9], who observed similar trends among students and cadets of Ukrainian universities, indicating that proximity to the conflict zone intensified negative mental health outcomes, including somatic symptoms, anxiety, insomnia, social dysfunction, and severe depression. Additionally, Gilreath et al. [10] investigated stressors impacting the academic performance and well-being of youth in wartime, noting risks such as suicidal tendencies and substance abuse in both short and long terms.

Although the psychological impact of the conflict primarily affected individuals within the war zones, those ideologically aligned with the conflict in central Europe and beyond also experienced repercussions. Stressors and increased anxiety were observed globally. [11] For instance, Kimhi et al. [12] examined resilience and coping mechanisms among samples from Ukraine and neighboring countries during the conflict, highlighting differences in coping indicators such as hope, well-being, perceived threats, distress symptoms, and sense of danger. The Czech Republic exhibited the highest level of well-being but reported the lowest level of hope.

Stress arises as a natural physiological reaction to external perceived threats. Increased stress levels represent one of the psychological consequences of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. [13]

According to Carver [14], specific stress-coping strategies can be assigned to any of the following groups – self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional or instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, or self-blame.

The assessment of a coping strategy is fundamentally linked to whether it demonstrates an *adaptive* (beneficial) or *maladaptive* (detrimental) impact on an individual's well-being. Adaptive coping strategies encompass actions like physical activity, mindfulness practices, and seeking social support, while maladaptive behaviors include activities such as avoidance, overeating, and drug use. [15] The classification of coping strategies into adaptive and maladaptive behavior is a frequently utilized approach in coping strategy research. [16, 17]

Problem-focused coping involves managing the problem causing the stress, through actions like problem-solving and decision-making. *Emotion-focused* coping aims to manage the emotional response to the problem, often used when the stressor is seen as unchangeable, and includes strategies like seeking comfort and relaxation. *Avoidant* coping strategies involve consciously or subconsciously avoiding the stressor, which can lead to temporary relief but often exacerbates stress in the long run. These coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive, depending on the situation and how they are used. [5]

Studies show that effective coping skills correlate with enhanced life satisfaction and resilience, with problem-focused coping linked to higher resilience and emotion-focused coping associated with lower resilience. [18] Numerous studies indicate that individuals with a strong coping self-efficacy tend to employ more adaptive coping strategies. [19, 20]

Research suggests that the military system depends on, and reinforces, problem-focused behavior to a greater degree, which is why it favors a problem-focused coping strategy. [21] In a military context, Mikulincer and Florian [22] discovered that recruits who employed emotion-focused coping perceived basic training as threatening, while those who utilized problem-focused coping viewed it as a challenge. During basic training, West Point cadets demonstrated both efficient problem-solving and emotion-focused coping strategies, such as engaging in physical activity, humor, rationalization, and seeking strong social support, as identified by Gold and Friedman. [7] Among military personnel, Morgan et al. [23] found that the most common coping behaviors involved problem-solving, talking to friends, hobbies and physical activity. Similarly, Bray et al. [24] found that most of the US military employed problem-focused coping strategies, such as thinking of a plan to solve problems, seeking support from friends/family members, and exercising, rather than resorting to avoidant coping strategies like eating or drinking. Udeh et al. [25] also discovered in a study involving 261 Nigerian military personnel that the majority of them employ positive coping strategies for stress management, including thinking of plans to solve problems, engaging in physical exercise or sports, and reading. The Department of Defense Survey of Health Related Behaviors Among Active Duty Military Personnel indicated a preference for constructive active coping strategies over avoidance-oriented ones. These include seeking social support and engaging in physical activities or hobbies. This indicates an overall preference for adaptive coping strategies over maladaptive ones. However, a significant portion of military personnel reported maladaptive coping strategies like alcohol or tobacco use. [26]

In military settings, alcohol consumption is often seen as a way to relieve stress, offering a means to unwind after a challenging day [27] as several studies have noted an increase in drinking behavior during service. [28] Additionally, in a

separate study, Dolan et al. [29] found that less experienced, lower-ranking junior-enlisted soldiers reported higher levels of maladaptive coping compared to noncommissioned officers and officers.

3. Methodology

Regarding the aim, the research was conducted within a quantitative paradigm. The basic component of the questionnaire survey is the standardized Brief COPE inventory [14], which allows the assessment of different ways in which people respond to stress. The authors utilized a brief form of a previously published measure called the COPE inventory [3], which is reliable and valid. The full COPE consists of 60 items distributed across 15 scales, with 4 items per scale. Within a given scale, there is considerable redundancy in item content. Therefore, the Brief COPE inventory, consisting of 14 scales, each containing two items, was developed. In total, it encompasses 28 items. [14] The 14 scales of the Brief COPE inventory focus on examining the extent to which the following strategies are used:

1. *Problem-Focused Coping* – Active coping, Use of Informational Support, Planning, Positive Reframing.
2. *Emotion-Focused Coping* – Venting, Use of Emotional Support, Humour, Acceptance, Self-Blame, Religion.
3. *Avoidant Coping* – Self Distraction, Denial, Substance Use, Behavioral Disengagement.

Data were collected at the beginning of 2024 through an online questionnaire. The target population consisted of first-year (89%) and second-year (11%) military students at the Faculty of Military Leadership of the University of Defence. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed in a pre-survey conducted among selected military students. The purpose and aim of the research, including full assurance of anonymity, were explained to all participants before data collection.

A total of 178 respondents participated in the research, with 22% being women and 78% men. 98% of the respondents were between 19 and 24 years old, with the remaining 2% being older.

To address the first research question, four questions with responses on the Likert scale were created. Respondents were asked to indicate how they perceive the situation in Ukraine – whether they consider it serious, whether it makes them stressed/nervous, and whether they think it will affect their future careers. The response options included "I fully disagree," "I rather disagree," "I rather agree," and "I fully agree."

For the second research question, a Brief COPE inventory was employed. This 28-item closed-ended questionnaire explores stress-coping strategies. Respondents again used the aforementioned response scale. These 28 questions were then categorized based on their focus into 14 stress-coping strategies, following the procedure outlined by Carver. [14]

Quantitative data were analyzed statistically. The frequencies of responses, indicating the level of agreement with the presented statements regarding the perception of the security situation and the implemented stress-coping strategies, were determined. Mean values, standard deviations, and medians of the responses are also reported.

4. Results

Following the research questions, the authors initially examine how military students perceive the deteriorating security situation, particularly concerning the RUC. Subsequently, the results of the Brief COPE inventory are presented. In the paper, this instrument is used to identify the stress-coping strategies employed by the respondents (military students) to deal with the stress potentially induced by an uncertain future and deteriorating global security.

Firstly, it is important to understand how the respondents perceive the current emotionless situation. If they do not perceive it as too serious, it can be inferred that the current situation does not cause them significant stress or nervousness. Therefore, it may not be relevant to investigate their stress-coping strategies associated with increased safety risk. Conversely, if the respondents perceive the situation as serious, it can be expected (and is examined through the following closed questions) that the current situation is causing them some level of stress. In such cases, it is logical to explore the stress-coping strategies they employ.

The results pertaining to the first research question – how military students perceive the deteriorating security situation associated with the RUC – are presented in Table 1. (The possible response options are: 1 – I fully disagree; 2 – I rather disagree; 3 – I rather agree; 4 – I fully agree).

Table 1.

Perception of the security situation

Statement	Average	STD	Median
I perceive the situation as serious.	3.34	0.81	4
I am nervous about the situation.	2.26	0.87	2
The situation stresses me out.	1.84	0.79	2
The situation will likely impact my military career.	3.12	0.82	3

Table 1 indicates that military students perceive the situation as serious, with an average score of 3.34, placing it between "I rather agree" and "I fully agree". The median score is even higher at 4 ("I fully agree with the statement"). Additionally, they recognize that the current situation is likely to impact their military career. However, on average, this

situation does not cause significant stress or unease for them. Students display a considerable level of consistency in their responses, with no significant differences noted (standard deviations are around 0.8). Further details of these results are visualized in Figure 1.
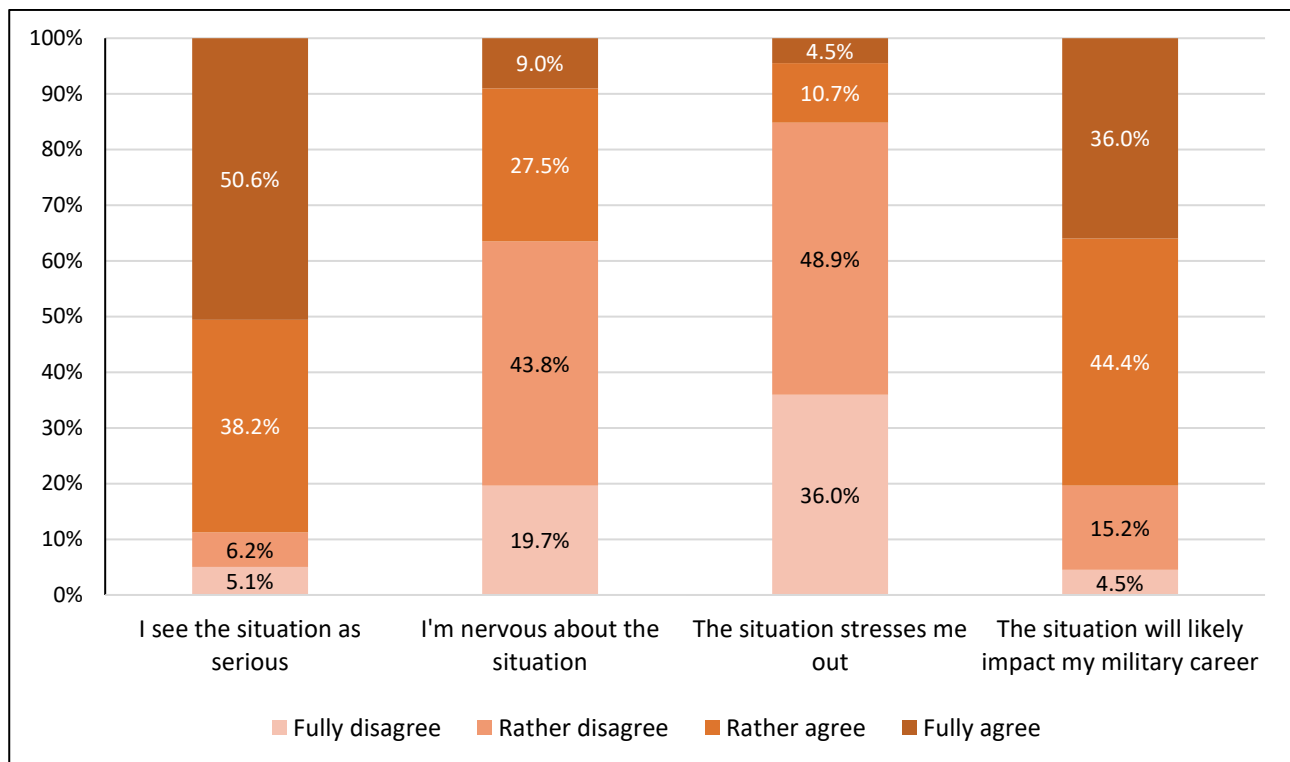

Fig. 1. Perception of the security situation

Figure 1 illustrates the strong perception among students regarding the seriousness of the security situation, with 89% of students overall agreeing with this statement. Among them, a significant proportion of 90 students – half of all respondents – strongly agree. Conversely, only 11% of students either strongly or somewhat disagree with this perception.

Table 2.
Stress-coping strategies of the military students

Statement	Average	STD	Median
SCS 1 (Self Distraction)	2.36	0.99	2
SCS 2 (Active coping)	2.35	1.01	2
SCS 3 (Denial)	1.75	0.9	1
SCS 4 (Substance Use)	1.46	0.77	1
SCS 5 (Emotional Support)	1.99	0.98	2
SCS 6 (Behavioral Disengagement)	2.00	1.02	2
SCS 7 (Venting)	2.00	0.91	2
SCS 8 (Use of Informational Support)	1.98	0.97	2
SCS 9 (Positive Reframing)	2.25	0.97	2
SCS 10 (Self-Blame)	1.58	0.84	1
SCS 11 (Planning)	2.46	1.04	3
SCS 12 (Humor)	2.60	1.05	3
SCS 13 (Acceptance)	2.93	0.94	3
SCS 14 (Religion)	1.60	0.94	1

Despite the perceived seriousness of the security situation resulting from the RUC, respondents do not report significant levels of stress or nervousness. A majority of 113 students (63%) did not confirm feeling nervous due to the situation. Furthermore, 85% express disagreement with the idea that the situation is stressing them out, with only 27 students (15%) admitting to feeling stressed by it.

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Moreover, respondents indicate a high level of agreement with the statement suggesting that the RUC will likely impact their military career. Alongside a high mean score of 3.12, it is worth noting that 80% of respondents agree with this statement – 45% somewhat and 36% strongly. The remaining 19% express less conviction about the conflict's impact on their future career.

Based on the standard deviation, it can be inferred that respondents' opinions are quite consistent, with no significant differences in their answers. They are in relatively high agreement regarding their perception.

Next, the results pertaining to the second research question are presented. The assessment of the stress-coping strategies (SCS) employed by military students to manage the stress induced by the security situation, primarily related to the RUC, is detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 displays the basic statistical parameters of the declared stress-coping strategies related to coping with stress caused by a security situation, specifically RUC. The least applied strategies by respondents are substance use, self-blame, religion, denial, as well as emotional support, behavioral disengagement and venting. Positive reframing, self distraction, and active coping are then applied to a higher degree. On average, the most used strategies are planning, humour and acceptance, whose median value is 3 ("I rather agree").
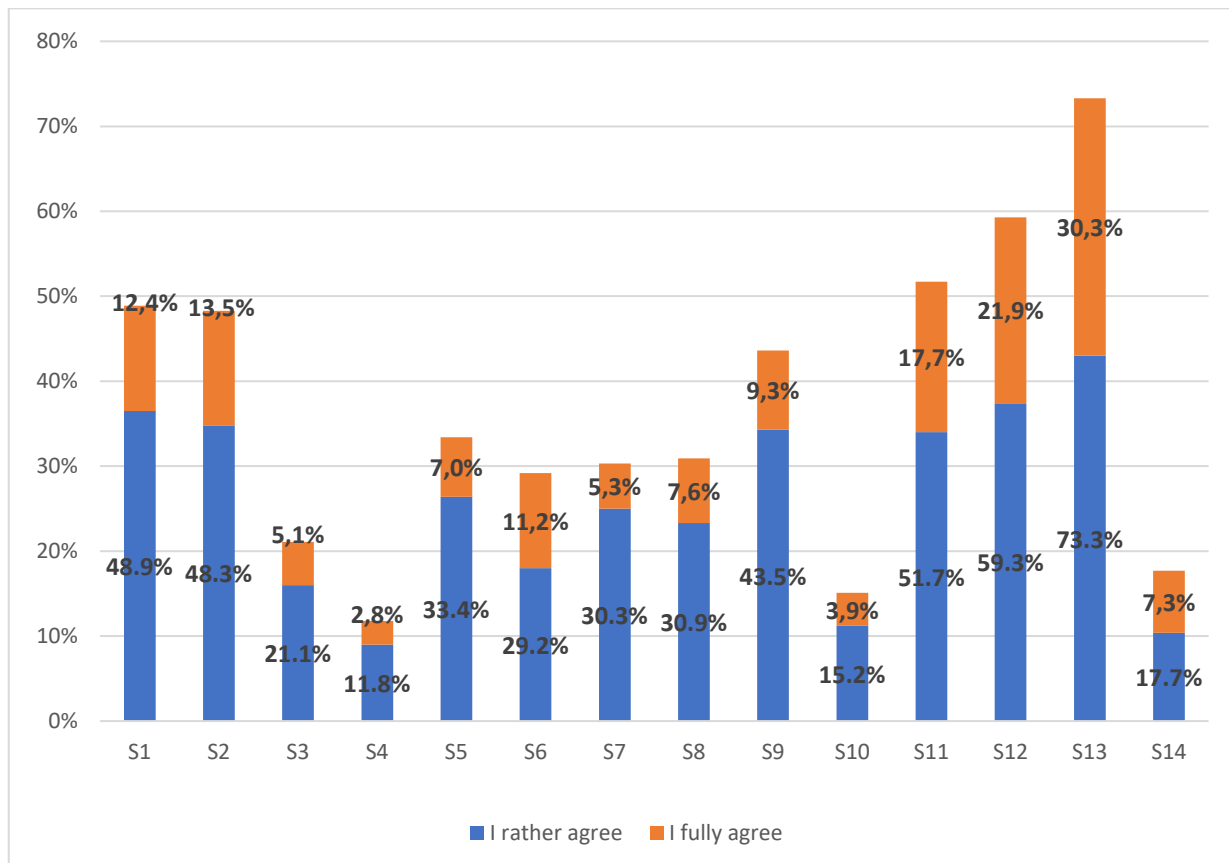

Fig. 2. Percentage of affirmative responses for the implementation of individual stress coping strategies.
Legend: *S1 – Self Distraction; S2 – Active Coping; S3 – Denial, S4 – Substance Use; S5 – Emotional Support; S6 - Behavioral Disengagement; S7 – Venting; S8 – Use of Informational Support; S9 – Positive Reframing; S10 – Self-Blame, S11 – Planning; S12 – Humor; S13 – Acceptance; S14 - Religion.*

The results for each stress-coping strategy are shown in more detail in Figure 2. It shows the level of agreement with the implementation of each stress-coping strategy. The values in the graph show the overall percentage of responses that confirm that the respondent uses the strategy. More than 50% of the respondents declare the application of the strategies planning (51.7%), humour (59.3%), and acceptance (73.3%). Of the values shown, always about one-third of the respondents even stated "I fully agree", i.e. they fully confirm that they use the strategy. The strategies self distraction and active coping (both confirmed by about 48% of the respondents) and positive reframing (43.5%) are also confirmed to a relatively high degree. About one-third of the respondents agree that they use the strategies of emotional support, behavioral disengagement, venting and use of informational support. The fewest students report using denial (21.1%), religion (17.7%), self-blame (15.2%) and substance use (11.8%) to reduce stress.

The above evidence suggests that students prioritize adaptive coping strategies over maladaptive ones. It is useful to further analyze which type of strategies predominates if we classify them into Problem-Focused, Emotion Focused and Avoidant strategies. The results are shown in Figure 3.
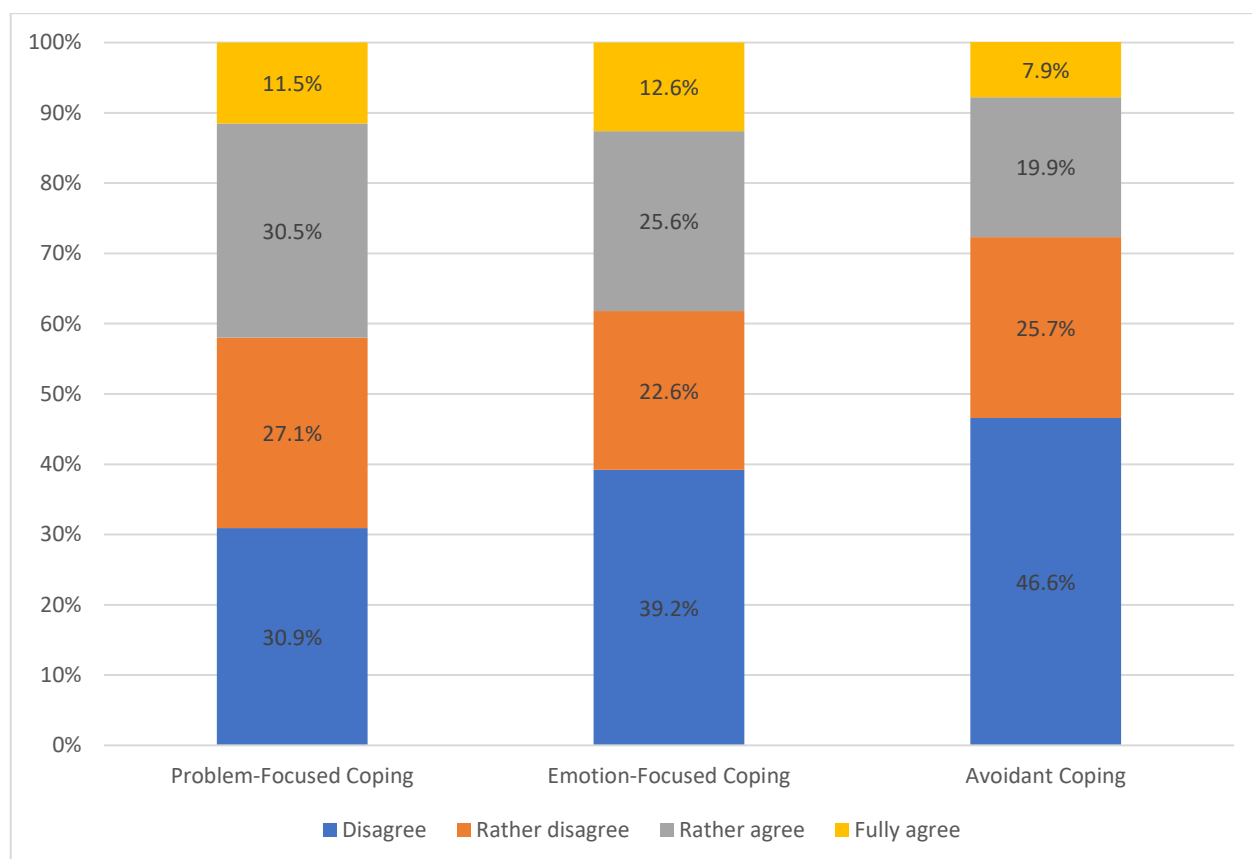
Fig. 3. Application of individual groups of stress-coping strategies

When stress-coping strategies are categorized according to their nature into Problem-Focused coping, Emotion-focused coping, and Avoidant coping (see Figure 3), then problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies are consistently reported by approximately 40% of the respondents. In contrast, Avoidant coping is reported by 27.8% of the respondents.

5. Discussion

The tendency of students toward *problem-focused* coping, followed by *emotion-focused* coping strategies, and with *avoidant coping* being the least used strategy, can be observed. In the study by Chudzicka-Czupała, the problem-focused coping strategy was also the most commonly used among the three groups of respondents (1,598 participants from Ukraine, Poland, and Taiwan), followed by emotion-focused and avoidance coping strategies. [1] This outcome is favorable because young soldiers who prefer avoidant coping are at greater risk of experiencing symptoms of mental health problems compared to those who utilize problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. [21] Problem-focused coping strategies are generally used when people appraise the situation as changeable [30,31], which might be particularly in line with the finding that students don't feel significantly nervous or stressed about the security situation. This finding appears to be inconsistent with some of the previous research – e.g. [1]. The inclination toward *adaptive* strategies is evident, with humor and planning ranking among the top three coping strategies used, which is consistent with previous findings. [7, 24] On the contrary, the findings regarding *maladaptive* coping strategies [27, 28] have not been confirmed, as substance use was found to be the least utilized strategy among the 14 options provided by the questionnaire.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to investigate how young military students at the University of Defence in the Czech Republic perceive the deteriorating security situation, particularly focusing on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This formed the subject of the first research question because before identifying stress-coping strategies associated with this conflict, it was necessary to ascertain whether these young individuals perceived the situation as serious and potentially affecting their future careers.

The results revealed that young people who have chosen to join the Czech Armed Forces perceive the security situation as serious to a relatively high degree. A total of 89% of them agree with the statement that the situation is serious, with an average score of 3.34 on a scale ranging from 1 ("fully disagree") to 4 ("fully agree"). However, this awareness surprisingly does not correlate with high levels of stress and nervousness. More than 85% of respondents completely or somewhat disagree that the condition associated with the RUC significantly stresses them.

The combination of these students' statements reveals a certain bravery – they are aware of the seriousness of the situation, yet it does not cause them significant stress. Consistent with this finding, subsequent analyses examining specific stress coping strategies indicate that students do not report significantly high levels of any of the strategies offered. On average, students' responses range between 1.5 and 2.5 on the aforementioned scale. Only one of the strategies, Acceptance, has a higher value (2.93).

Consequently, the second and key research question focuses on identifying stress-coping strategies associated with dealing with a challenging security situation and an uncertain future. Students predominantly declare the application of the following strategies – acceptance, planning, and humor. Furthermore, positive reframing, self-distraction, and active coping are also implemented to some extent. The strategies least confirmed by respondents include substance use, self-blame, religion, denial, as well as emotional support, behavioral disengagement, and venting. *Problem-focused* coping and *adaptive* coping strategies are generally predominant.

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