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# **Coping with Basic Military Training**

**Teo Cheek Heng, Dorothy**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
SUMMARY .....	xi
<b>CHAPTER</b>	
<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Background to Research Problem .....	1
Factors Affecting Coping in the Military .....	1
Objectives of the Present Research .....	4
Rationale of the Research .....	5
Significance of the Study on Coping with Basic Military Training .....	6
Coping in the Singapore Context .....	6
The Possible Combat Stress Reactions in Times of War .....	7
Factors Related to Emergency Behaviour Operations .....	8
Theoretical Models of Stress and Coping .....	8
Three Models of Stress .....	8
The Additive and Interaction Models of Personality and Coping .....	11
Research Questions .....	12
Definition of Terms .....	14
Assumptions .....	16
Delimitations .....	17
<b>2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE .....</b>	<b>19</b>
Factors Affecting Coping .....	19
Personality and Coping .....	19
Family Characteristics and Coping .....	26
Social Support and Coping .....	27
Adjustment to Military Life .....	28
Coping with Military Training in the United States of America .....	28
Coping with the Impact of War among Israeli Soldiers .....	33
Evaluation of the Ways of Coping Questionnaire .....	38

<b>3. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Sample .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Selection of Sample .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Description of Sample .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Ethical Considerations .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Instruments .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Description of Instruments .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Order of Administration .....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Data Collection .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Statistical Analysis .....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>4. RESULTS .....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Factors Related to Psychological Distress .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Personal Problems .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Social Support .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Personality .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Coping Strategies .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Mental Preparedness .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Physical Preparedness .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Physical Fitness Level .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Pre-Enlistment Medical Status .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Exogenous Factors .....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>Endogenous Factors .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>Factors Predicting Psychological Symptoms .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Factors Related to Individual Physical Proficiency .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Personal Problems .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Social Support .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Personality .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Coping Strategies .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Mental Preparedness .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Physical Preparedness .....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Physical Fitness Level .....</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Pre-Enlistment Medical Status .....</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Exogenous Factors .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Endogenous Factors .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Factors Predicting Physical Performance .....</b>	<b>93</b>
<b>Factors Related to Completion of Basic Military Training .....</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Personality .....</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Coping Strategies .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Deterioration in Medical Status during Enlistment .....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Confinement .....</b>	<b>97</b>

4.	Age .....	98
	Race .....	99
	Other Factors .....	100
	Factors Predicting Completion of Basic Military Training .....	104
	Effects of Personality and Situation on Coping .....	106
	Extraversion and Coping .....	106
	Neuroticism and Coping .....	111
	Psychoticism and Coping .....	116
	Social Desirability and Coping .....	121
	Impulsiveness and Coping .....	125
5.	IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION .....	131
	Summary of Main Findings .....	133
	Implications and Recommendations for the Singapore Armed Forces ....	137
	Scope of Study and Limitations .....	146
	Evaluation of the Ways of Coping Questionnaire .....	147
	Conclusion .....	148
	APPENDIX .....	149
A.	LETTER OF APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH .....	149
B.	BASIC MILITARY TRAINING STRESS SCALE .....	151
C.	TRAINING DIFFICULTY SCORES ON THE BASIC MILITARY TRAINING SCALE AS RATED BY MILITARY INSTRUCTORS .....	154
D.	QUESTIONNAIRE BOOKLET 1 .....	156
E.	QUESTIONNAIRE BOOKLET 2 .....	167
F.	QUESTIONNAIRE BOOKLET 3 .....	183
G.	QUESTIONNAIRE BOOKLET 4 .....	189
H.	COMPARISON OF MEAN PERSONALITY SCORES ON THE EYSENCK PERSONALITY SCALES BETWEEN RECRUITS AND THE EYSENCK SAMPLE .....	199
I.	VERBAL INSTRUCTIONS .....	201
J.	OTHER TABLES .....	205
K.	INTER-CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FACTORS AFFECTING GENERAL SYMPTOM SCORES .....	222
L.	INTER-CORRELATIONS BETWEEN FACTORS AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL PHYSICAL PROFICIENCY TEST RESULTS .....	224
M.	INTER-CORRELATION OF SCALES ON THE EYSENCK PERSONALITY SCALES .....	226
N.	INTER-CORRELATIONS OF SCALES ON THE WAYS OF COPING QUESTIONNAIRE .....	228
	BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	230

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Biographical Data of Recruits .....	42
2. Factors that Correlate with General Symptom during High Stress Period .....	67
3. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores between Recruits with and without Increase in Personal Problems .....	68
4. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores among Recruits with Different Levels of Mental Preparedness .....	71
5. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores among Recruits with Different Levels of Physical Preparedness .....	73
6. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores between Recruits with and without Deterioration in Medical Status .....	75
7. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores among Recruits Who Took Different Types of Medical Leave .....	77
8. Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores among Recruits Who Come from Different Levels of Family Income .....	79
9. Factors Predicting Psychological Symptoms .....	82
10. Factors that Correlate with Individual Physical Proficiency Test during High Stress Period .....	84
11. Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results among Recruits with Different Levels of Physical Preparedness .....	86
12. Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits Who Were More and Less Physically Fit before Enlistment .....	87
13. Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results among Recruits Who Come from Different Levels of Family Income .....	90
14. Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits from Different Types of Housing.....	91

15. <b>Factors Predicting Physical Performance on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test .....</b>	<b>94</b>
16. <b>Comparison of Mean Scores for Factors Related to Coping between Recruits Who Completed and Did Not Complete Basic Military Training .....</b>	<b>95</b>
17. <b>Deterioration in Medical Status and Basic Military Training Pass Rates...</b>	<b>97</b>
18. <b>Comparison between Those Who and Were Not Confined during the High Stress Period and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....</b>	<b>98</b>
19. <b>Comparison of Race and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....</b>	<b>99</b>
20. <b>Factors Affecting Failure to Complete Basic Military Training .....</b>	<b>105</b>
21. <b>Main Effects of Time and Extraversion and Their Interactions on Coping Strategies and General Symptoms .....</b>	<b>108</b>
22. <b>Main Effects of Time and Neuroticism and Their Interactions on Coping Strategies and General Symptoms .....</b>	<b>113</b>
23. <b>Main Effects of Time and Psychoticism and Their Interactions on Coping Strategies and General Symptoms .....</b>	<b>118</b>
24. <b>Main Effects of Time and Social Desirability and Their Interactions on Coping Strategies and General Symptoms .....</b>	<b>122</b>
25. <b>Main Effects of Time and Impulsiveness and Their Interactions on Coping Strategies and General Symptoms .....</b>	<b>128</b>
26. <b>Training Difficulty Scores on the Basic Military Training Stress Scale as Rated by Military Instructors .....</b>	<b>155</b>
27. <b>Comparison of Mean Personality Scores on the Eysenck Personality Scales between Recruits and the Eysenck Sample .....</b>	<b>200</b>
28. <b>Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores between Recruits Who Were More and Less Physically Fit before Enlistment .....</b>	<b>206</b>
29. <b>Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits with and without Medical Problems before Enlistment .....</b>	<b>207</b>

30.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits Who Were and Were Not Given Secondary Appointment .....	208
31.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits Who Were Confined and Those Who Were Not Confined .....	209
32.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores between Recruits from Different Types of Housing .....	210
33.	Comparison of Mean of General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits of Different Races .....	211
34.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits Who Come From Different Birth Positions .....	212
35.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Bilingual and Multilingual Recruits .....	213
36.	Comparison of Mean General Symptom Scores and Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits with Different Levels of Education .....	214
37.	Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits with and without Increase in Personal Problems.....	214
38.	Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results among Recruits with Different Levels of Mental Preparedness .....	215
39.	Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results between Recruits with and without Deterioration in Medical Status .....	215
40.	Comparison of Mean Point Scores on the Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results among Recruits Who Took Different Types of Medical Leave .....	216
41.	Mental Preparedness and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	216



42.	Physical Preparedness and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	217
43.	Pre-Enlistment Physical Fitness Level and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	217
44.	Pre-Enlistment Medical Status and Basic Military Training Pass Rates ...	218
45.	Types of Medical Leave and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	218
46.	Secondary Appointment and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	219
47.	Family Income and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	219
48.	Type of Housing and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	220
49.	Birth Position and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	220
50.	Number of Spoken Languages and Basic Military Training Pass Rates ...	221
51.	Education Level and Basic Military Training Pass Rates .....	221
52.	Inter-correlations between Factors Affecting General Symptom Scores ...	223
53.	Inter-correlations between Factors Affecting Individual Physical Proficiency Test Results .....	225
54.	Inter-correlations of Scales on the Eysenck Personality Scales .....	227
55.	Inter-correlations of Scales on the Ways of Coping Questionnaire .....	229

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. A Transactional Model of Stress and Coping .....	10
2. Two Models of Personality, Coping and Maladjustment .....	11
3. Extraversion and Planful Problem Solving .....	110
4. Extraversion and Positive Reappraisal .....	110
5. Extraversion and General Symptoms .....	110
6. Neuroticism and Self Control .....	115
7. Neuroticism and Escape-Avoidance .....	115
8. Neuroticism and Planful Problem Solving .....	115
9. Neuroticism and General Symptoms .....	116
10. Psychoticism and Confrontative Coping .....	120
11. Psychoticism and Escape-Avoidance .....	120
12. Psychoticism and General Symptoms .....	120
13. Social Desirability and Escape-Avoidance .....	122
14. Social Desirability and Planful Problem Solving .....	125
15. Social Desirability and General Symptoms .....	125
16. Impulsiveness and Escape-Avoidance .....	127
17. Impulsiveness and General Symptoms .....	127

## SUMMARY

The majority of young male Singaporeans and permanent residents who reach the age of 18 to 23 years are conscripted for about two and half years to serve National Service in the Singapore Armed Forces. A review of research literature indicates that the transition from civilian to military life may be stressful for some, particularly during the first 10 weeks of Basic Military Training. The objectives of this study were to find out the factors that were related to the ability to cope with Basic Military Training, both in terms of psychological well being as well as in physical performance. The sample comprised of a Company of 200 recruits who underwent the enhanced Basic Military Training course. Measurements were made at three points of time; on the first day of enlistment, during the high training stress period, and during the low training stress period. The Eysenck Personality Scale, Ways of Coping Questionnaire, General Health Questionnaire, Personal Problems Checklist and Perceived Social Support Questionnaire were used. Results of the Individual Physical Proficiency Test and pass rates were obtained from the trainer. The data was analyzed using correlational analysis, one-way and multivariate analysis of variance, independent t-test and multiple regression analysis.

The results suggest that personality factors, the use of specific coping strategies and deterioration in health are predictors of psychological distress. In particular, recruits who are high in neuroticism, who use less planful problem solving, and

who develop medical problems during the training period are likely to report more psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, somatic complaints and social dysfunction.

This study also showed that National Service posed as a stressful event which resulted in a significant decrease in the use of several coping strategies such as confrontative coping, self-control, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving and positive reappraisal. This decrease in coping was also accompanied by a significant increase in psychological symptoms. The study further shows that certain individuals may be vulnerable to facing psychological distress. Personality factors such as neuroticism, introversion and impulsiveness may predispose individuals to use certain maladaptive coping strategies. In both civilian stressful events and during the 10 weeks of Basic Military Training, recruits who had higher levels of neuroticism used significantly more escape-avoidance and self-controlling of emotions; introverted recruits used significantly less planful problem solving and impulsive recruits used significantly more escape avoidance.

The implications of these findings are discussed, with recommendations on how health professionals and trainers in the Singapore Armed Forces can address the problem of stress in the military. These include pre-enlistment psychological screening, teaching stress management and effective coping techniques, and early therapeutic interventions to minimize medical and psychological symptoms.