

Strategies adopted by Not in Education, Employment, or Training Youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by COVID-19

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Abstract

This study explores coping behavioural strategies adopted by Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the nationwide lockdown because of COVID-19. A qualitative approach was employed in this study. Data was collected from a sample of 50 NEET youth between the ages of 18-24 years old in the Western Cape Province and analysed through thematic analysis. The study findings revealed that the following strategies were adopted in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress, regular physical activities, family bonding, and youth service. The results of this study have implications for youth work practice in South Africa. For instance, the results of the study should prompt youth workers, social workers, community development workers and adult education practitioners to develop a youth development programme that will promote youth resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: coping behaviour, COVID-19, nationwide lockdown, NEET youth, youth resilience

Introduction

According to Sparreboom and Staneva (2014), NEET youths are youth that are not employed, not in education and not engaged in any form of training. The COVID-19 nationwide lockdown contributed to the rise of mental health issues among NEET youth (Chauke and Chinyakata 2020; Büssing et al. 2020). Coping behaviour is referred to as an individual's behavioural response to stressors that gives individuals opportunities to reduce stress (Henry, Shorter et al. 2019). In December 2019, Wuhan, the capital city

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of China, found itself in a state of pandemonium because of the outbreak of the deadly pandemic called the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) (Shereen et al. 2020). COVID-19 is a highly transmittable and pathogenic viral infection caused by a severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), which after emerging in Wuhan, China, spread around the world like wildfire (Adetuyi et al. 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) shows that by 20 March 2022, over 468 million people across the globe had tested positive for COVID-19 and 6 million deaths worldwide have been recorded (World Health Organization, 2020a). On the 31st of March 2022, South Africa reported 1,888 new COVID-19 cases and this brought the total number of laboratory-confirmed cases to 3,718,953. This increase represents a 6.4% positivity rate and 100,032 total fatalities to date. 39% of COVID-19 cases were from Gauteng, Kwa-Zulu Natal 22%; Western Cape 21%; Eastern Cape and Free State 4% respectively; Limpopo, and Mpumalanga 3% respectively, and the Northern Cape 1% (National Institutes for Communicable Disease 2022).

COVID-19 has also affected millions of people's mental health (World Health Organization, 2020b). In response to the rapid impetus of COVID-19, the South African government embarked on a nationwide lockdown with adjusted levels (Iwara et al. 2020; Nancy and Jean-Pierre 2020). Measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 involve wearing a face mask in public spaces, mandatory quarantine of buildings or residential areas, and maintaining social distancing (Güner, Hasanoglu & Aktaş, 2020).

Chauke, Obadire, and Malatji (2021) found that some of the youth in South Africa blamed the manner in which the government used social media to raise awareness about COVID-19, the cause of mental health outbreaks, indicating that social media was used to promote scare tactics. On the other hand, the spirit of resilience in the context of COVID-19 was shown by NEET youth who played a significant role in the fight against COVID-19, through volunteer work (Mpungose 2020; African portal (2021) . Chauke (2020) posits that in the effort to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, young people volunteered in projects such as the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) to promote social distancing and to encourage people in public spaces to practise proper hygienic measures, like sanitising.

The nationwide lockdown left many children and young people confined at home, and this contributed to health-related issues (Margaritis et al. 2020). Against this backdrop, young people's rate of physical activity decreased, and parents have been encouraged to motivate children and adolescents to do physical activities at home. Wang et al. (2020) suggests that in modern society videos can be used to promote physical activities among children at home as a way of promoting a healthy lifestyle in the age of the COVID-19 lockdown. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) indicates that during COVID-19 youth volunteers dedicated their time to helping other youth on how to cope with COVID-19 confinement. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020) further argues that in the age of the global pandemic, the government needs to promote youth resilience. International

Labour Organization (2020) shows that during the pandemic, social networking has become useful for youth to connect with their families and peers which helps them to cope with stress. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) alludes to the fact that the youth should be provided with accurate information via media to avoid youth 'risk behaviours in the context of COVID-19.

According to Shen (2020), youth resilience in the age of COVID-19 does not only focus on addressing public health issues but creates a better future for youth and everyone in society. Sports activities and art competitions help the youths to cope with stress in the context of COVID-19 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2020). UNESCO (2020) avers that young artist uses their digital skills in helping other youth on how to cope with COVID-19 during the lockdown. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (2020) shows that in helping teenagers to cope with stress as a result of COVID-19, parents need to promote a healthy routine at home by spending quality time with their children. This can involve eating together. Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (2020) further shows that spiritual leaders should use virtual platforms to reach out to teenagers weekly. This will go a long way in helping them to cope with COVID-19 home containment stress. Shen (2020) notes that parents need to talk to their children at home about the effects of COVID-19, which will help them to cope with the negative effects of COVID-19. Pigaiani et al. (2020) show that some of the youth spent most of their time reading to cope with COVID-19 stress. Katja et al. (2002) states that developing a positive attitude towards life helps in dealing with stress. Marchini et al. (2020) suggest that perception of the self helps youth in dealing with mental issues in the context of COVID-19.

United Nations Children's Fund (2020b) reported that in dealing with stress caused by COVID-19, adolescents need to find a new way of interacting with their peers, such as learning how to talk about their feelings. In a time of home confinement as a result of COVID-19, some people have been reported to engage in negative strategies to cope with stress such as watching pornography (Mestre-Bach et al. 2020). Sexton-Radek (2021) posits that in the USA young adults use sleeping as a way of coping with COVID-19, which if done in excess can also result in other health complications. Thus, social support is suggested as the better alternative. Students in China with cognitive coping skills, that is, reasoning skills were less likely to experience anxiety in the context of COVID-19 (Li & Peng, 2020).

Previous studies on coping strategies in the context of COVID-19 focused on youth and students not specifically NEET youth. Against this backdrop, the current study fills this critical area of youth and health research by highlighting how NEET youths cope with the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. It is imperative to give NEET youths a voice in the context of COVID-19 to shape a youth agenda. Therefore, this study gives the NEET youths a voice to be heard. There is much scholarly literature on COVID-19 and its impact on the youth. The youth are a heterogeneous group; therefore, it is important to know the different coping strategies that they used to cope with the COVID-19

nationwide lockdown. This study explores coping behavioural strategies adopted by Not in Education, Employment and Training (NEET) youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the nationwide lockdown because of COVID-19

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Creswell and Creswell (2017) assert that qualitative research aims to understand the world through the participants' perspective and lived experience. The qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study because it enables one to understand the world through interaction with the participants. In addition, this method helps in probing rich in-depth information. The researcher considered the experience of the participants as the most important element of gathering accurate information (Royce, 2008). This approach was useful in understanding coping behavioural strategies that NEET youth adopted in dealing with the psychological and emotionally stressed caused by COVID-19 national lockdown as the most vulnerable group in South Africa.

Research design

The researcher adopted phenomenological research design. A phenomenological research design is a research design used in qualitative research that seeks to understand a social phenomenon through the lived experience of the unique individual experience (Babbie, 2016). The NEET youth uses different behavioural strategies in coping with the psychological and emotional stress caused by COVID-19 nation-wide lockdown in South Africa. Therefore, the use of a phenomenological research design was helpful to achieve the study objective because the lived experiences of the NEET youth were gathered from different unique individuals.

Location and population

The study was conducted in the Western Cape province, of South Africa. The Western Cape province is one of the provinces characterised by a high rate of young people, not in employment and not in training. Fifty youths between the ages of 18-24 years who were unemployed, not in education or those who were not enrolled in college or vocational training were purposely sampled to participate in this study. The NEET youths were sampled from the NEET youth group that applied for the youth service programme after being NEET youth for years and few of those who participated in the youth service programme, but by the time the study was conducted they were unemployed.

Sampling

This study adopted purposive sampling, because the participants sampled in this study shared the same characteristic and knowledge about what the study aims to achieve through their lived experience. A total of 50 NEET youth participated in this study, gender was taken into consideration 50 % (25) male NEET youths were sampled and 50% (25) female NEET youths were sampled. The majority of the participants (48) lived with their parents and depended on them for survival while 2 were having their own homes, surviving on selling drinks, airtime, and call time at the taxi rank. Forty (40) of them do not have matric, as only 8 of the participants had matric and 2 of them had post-matric education. Forty (40) of the participants use alcohol and smoke while 10 neither drink alcohol nor smoke.

Data collection

With regard to data collection, the unstructured interview was used to collect data. The unstructured interview was useful in this study because the researcher had a normal conversation with the participants. The interviews were meant to be face-to-face however, this did not materialise, since the study was conducted during the third wave of COVID-19 in South Africa. Thus, the researcher decided to interview the participants using WhatsApp texts and telephonic interviews. English was used as the preferred language to conduct the interviews however, some participants were even given the opportunity to express their views in their own language such as IsiXhosa, which was interpreted by an isiXhosa speaker and translated into English. In a normal conversation, the participants were asked about the behavioural strategies that they have adopted to deal with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. The researcher encountered several challenges during the data collection process; some of the participants felt they had been used for too long by other researchers to get their views, but recommendations are not implemented.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse collected data. After the interview, the researcher took time to establish the meaning of the data collected by familiarising himself with written WhatsApp texts and recorded telephonic interviews. The researcher read text messages and listened to recorded audio to establish codes. Furthermore, the researcher coded the data and codes were developed based on the objectives of the study. Thereafter, themes were grouped as they emerged in the study. Important themes that guided the study were extracted and the presented data was forwarded to experts in the field to make some comments before the final version was studied further. In addition, the researcher then drafted a first report of the study findings. The report was not returned to the participants for comments because some were unreachable through their phones.

Ethical consideration

Ethical considerations were practised in this study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and explained to them that their participation was voluntary. The researcher promised the participants that their identity will be protected, and no names of the participants will be disclosed to the public.

Findings

This study explores coping behavioural strategies of the NEET youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the national lockdown as a result of COVID-19. Five major themes on how the NEET youth coped during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown emerged in this study as follows: regular physical activity, resistance to social media as a communication platform, family bonding and youth service. The presentation of each theme reinforced by the quotes as expressed by the participants is outlined below. A pseudonym is used in this study to de-identify the participant's real names.

Regular physical activities

One prominent theme from the responses that were identified as coping behavioural strategies of the NEET youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the national lockdown as a result of COVID-19 was regular physical activities. With regards to regular physical activities, participants indicated that in dealing with uncertainty caused by the global pandemic they would go to the street early in the morning, while it was still dark to ensure no one sees them do regular physical activities for two hours every day. To develop a healthy mind in a time of global pandemic the participants reported that doing physical exercises was very helpful because it helps to stop worrying too much about something that they cannot change. The extracts shown below illustrate this:

“Things have been tough for me since the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown was instituted by the government. I do not like the national lockdown because I do rely on selling some stuff for survival and my family depends on me. So, dealing with stress caused by COVID-19 I would wake up early in the morning and do regular exercises and run for a few hours. I think this strategy has been helpful and it helped me to remain claim.” (Mpho)

Undeniably, home physical activities are essential in managing stress. Many male participants (20) also expressed frustration caused by some restrictions such as curfews that denied people opportunities to exercise. However, some participants indicated that in complying with the government measures, they decided to set up their own gyms at home to exercise regularly. Some participants claimed that home exercises did not only help them to cope with the stress caused by the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. It also

helped in protecting themselves against the pandemic and some criminal activities that were happening in their communities. Another participant said:

“I set up my own gym at home where I exercise regularly; I think this also helped me in staying away from criminal activities or being the victim of crime or being infected by COVID-19.” (Marcus)

Gender also played a pivotal role in the engagement of the participants in regular, physical activities. Female participants would assist with domestic activities that have the elements of physical activities. COVID-19 nationwide lockdown had a negative impact on the well-being of young people. Therefore, the approach adopted by some of the female participants was to assist their parents with household duties. As some of the participants claimed that household duties that need physical strength helped them in dealing with the frustration emanating from the lockdown. Another participant noted that:

“When the government started changing the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown restrictions I was fed up, and I started doing additional exercises that helped me to relax and divert my attention.” (Andile)

Given that the participants were neither employed nor involved in education and training some of them felt like it was the end of the world. To do away with self-pity though, some of the participants claimed that exercising regularly helped them to develop positive thoughts and they believed that one day COVID-19 nationwide lockdown will be lifted.

Resistance to social media platforms

Social media is one of the most important channels of communication amongst the youth globally. In the age of COVID-19 social media was used to disseminate information about the pandemic. However, few of the participants (11) claimed that social media and other forms of communication such as television were used to spread propaganda about COVID-19 and for that reason participants claimed that they decided to take a break from social media. Moreover, the participants claimed abstinence from social media and watching news related to COVID-19 helped to cope with the uncertainty around the pandemic.

“Every day when I go to Facebook, I will read about fake news pertaining to COVID-19 and then I have decided to leave Facebook and I think until now it is helping me to cope with the stress caused by the national lockdown.” (Xoli)

Looking at the above response from the participants, it is clear that social media also created fear among the participants and the public in general regarding COVID-19. Against this backdrop some participants opted to avoid being the victim of fake news that fueled psychological and emotional stress and decided to withdraw their

participation in social media which some of the participants claimed helped them in coping with the national lockdown.

Family bonding

Participants revealed that their relationship with their parents was strengthened in the context of the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. Some participants mentioned that regardless of the economic hardships that they faced due to the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, the lack of money to provide for their basic needs was challenging. However, the family bond helped them to cope with the stress of being unemployed and isolated at home by the government. Some participants noted that:

“Lockdown made me spend most of my time with my parents. I think it helps me to cope with the fact that I have no work after searching for work for almost three years.” (Jail).

“I won’t lie I am not coping well with COVID-19 but, I think staying with my parents since both are not working depending on social grants, helps me to deal with life’s disappointments. I am 35 years old and I never found a good job. Here COVID-19 makes things worse for us but, I think spending time with my parents is helping.” (Riaan).

The participants claimed that regardless of the challenges they faced as a result of the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, they managed to develop a strong bond with their families which helped them to deal with the psychological and emotional stress. It emerged from the participant’s point of view that family bonding is essential as a psychological and emotional stress relief strategy during COVID-19.

Youth service

The COVID-19 national lockdown caused boredom experienced by all (50) participants interviewed in this study. For them, it was exacerbated by the fact that before COVID-19 they were looking for employment and suddenly did not know where to look for employment since companies were not hiring. To avoid boredom few participants (10) both males claimed that they decided to offer their services needed in a community initiative project.

“There are unemployed youth in South Africa who can disagree with them that COVID-19 affected us negatively, as our future even looks bleaker at this stage. So, making sure COVID-19 does not cause me to become insane, I have decided to offer my services to an orphanage centre in my town. I assisted the centre with their soup kitchen and distributed food to orphans.” (Xolani)

Evidently, the participants regardless of the negative impact of COVID-19, took it into their own hands to assist the vulnerable group. In addition, offering their services uplifted their spirit to cope with the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown.

“I do community service such as raising awareness of youth mental health in my community because youths are suffering from mental illness because of COVID-19. This also helps me to forget my worries and to have a positive attitude. Volunteering gives me hope for a better future post COVID-19.” (Chune)

Participants who offered their services for free claimed that helping people who were in need enabled them to develop positive feelings about themselves. In addition, developing positive feelings helped them in coping with the global pandemic. As indicated by the participants, helping people in a time of social distress also facilitated them to develop a personal quality, the ability to have hope regardless of circumstances.

Discussion

This study explores coping behavioural strategies adopted by the NEET youth in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the nationwide lockdown because of COVID-19. Overall, regular physical activity, resistance to social media platforms, family bonding and youth services were identified as coping strategies that the NEET youth adopted to deal with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the nationwide lockdown. The findings of this study provided valuable insight into how the NEET youth copes in the context of the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. In the level 5 COVID-19 nationwide lockdown most non-essential South African workers were denied the opportunity to leave their homes unless they had to purchase the necessary goods. Against this backdrop, the NEET youth in the study reported that to comply with COVID-19 nationwide lockdown regulations decided to open home gyms and exercise at home regularly. Margaritis et al. (2020) state that parents during a time of social distress should encourage home physical activities among their children. In addition, exercising helps them to develop a healthy mind and to temporarily forget about the challenges that they faced.

The findings from the study revealed that the NEET youth in their endeavour to cope with the psychological and emotional stress as a result of the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown spent their time constructively doing physical activities. In addition, physical activities that the NEET youth did involve running outside their homes. Gender also plays an important role in determining the physical activities that the NEET youth did. Female NEET youth assisted their parents with household duties. Furthermore, performing household duties helped them in dealing with the stress. A previous study by the CSTS (2020) indicates that in coping with COVID-19 stress parents and children need to spend time in a joint household and share responsibilities such as cooking meals together.

Family cohesion is vital in a time of social distress since it can help to manage stress. It emerged from the present study that since most of the activities were cancelled by the South African government it created the opportunity for the NEET youth to bond with their families. Shen (2020) posits that parents in times of social distress need to bond with their children and help them to talk about their everyday challenges. The study further revealed that the NEET youth claimed that bonding with their families in the age of COVID-19 helped them cope with the challenges they faced in the context of COVID-19. Contrary to the study finding of Pigaiani et al. (2020) some youths were reported to struggle during COVID-19 to spend quality time with their families due to family conflict. Some of the NEET youths reside with their parents who are not working even though that hurt them, but bonding with their families also helped them to not stress about their unemployment status. Family social cohesion is important in positive youth development, and against this backdrop, parents are seen playing a pivotal role in instilling hope to support the NEET youth during a time of social distress. Family support that people received from one another during COVID-19 helped them overcome many of the hardships brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, family support also strengthened their familial resilience (Rich et al. 2022).

Another important aspect of the findings of this study is that in coping with the psychological and emotional stress the NEET youth took it into their own hands to get involved in a community youth service project. This finding concurs with the work of Chauke (2020) who shows the spirit of youth resilience in the context of COVID-19 is to survive through volunteerism. In addition, being engaged in community youth service helped them to relieve stress. Moreover, the NEET youth reported that helping others assisted them to gain communication skills. The United Nations Children's Fund (2020a) in support of youth service encourages teens to cope with COVID-19 by helping others such as the victims of bullying. Moreover, during a period of social distress, the involvement of the NEET youth can help to develop psychological armour. UNESCO (2020) states that the use of youth digital work was incorporated by some to cope with stress caused by COVID-19 at the same time they were helping peers to cope with COVID-19.

The significant aspect of the current study's findings is the confirmation that the NEET youth understands that helping other people through youth services is also important and involves personal qualities that also help in dealing with social distress. Little attention is paid to the behavioural strategies to cope with the psychological and emotional stress among NEET youth caused by the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. This study revealed the great significance of the coping behavioural strategies that the NEET uses in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown.

The results of this study have implications for youth work practice in South Africa. For instance, the results of the study should prompt youth workers, social workers, community development workers and adult education practitioners to develop a youth

development programme that will promote youth resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and maintain healthy behaviour. Sports activities play an important role in reducing stress. Therefore, the government should establish youth sports work activities in different communities where NEET youths who have a passion for sports can participate in sports activities to relieve psychological and emotional stress caused by the COVID-19 national lockdown. During a pandemic it is crucial that the National Youth Development Agency through the National Youth Service Programme recruit the NEET youth interested in health, offer them theoretical training (N4 level) and then take them to their respective community to raise mental health promotion as a form of awareness targeting the NEET youth post-COVID-19 national lockdown.

Conclusion and recommendations

While similarities in how people cope with psychological and emotional stress were established in this study and compared to the previous studies, this study found that the NEET youth make use of different behavioural coping strategies in dealing with psychological and emotional stress. These strategies are participating in youth services, spending quality time with their families and exercising on a regular basis. The findings of this study have important implications for coping behavioural strategies that the NEET youth can use in dealing with the psychological and emotional stress caused by the COVID-19 national lockdown. Coping with the negative effects of COVID-19 does not require medical and scientific intervention per se, but psychosocial support is needed as a matter of urgency in South Africa and worldwide, targeting the most vulnerable youth population. The limitation of this study is that only NEET youth from one province, the Western Cape, were sampled. Against this backdrop, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to the entire South African NEET youth population. In response to challenges faced by the NEET youth in South Africa during the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, the government should roll out the Basic Support Package targeting NEET youth during and post the COVID nationwide lockdown. The Basic Support Package Programme should be gender sensitive and implemented through the model of the National Youth Service Programme in South Africa (Skill development and Community service). The National Youth Development Agency and other youth development organisations should design a social and emotional support programme that will provide online psychological and emotional support for NEET youth as a vulnerable group during and post the COVID-19 national lockdown.

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