Stress, coping strategies, and coping resources of graduate nursing students during the first semester of their study

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Abstract The objective of this study was to describe stress situations, coping strategies, and coping resources used by the master's nursing students during the first semester of their study. The Lazarus and Folkman stress, appraisal, and coping model were used as a framework for the study. Thirty-five master's nursing students, who enrolled in master's program at Ramathibodi School of Nursing in 1997, were asked to participate in the study by describing the stress situation related to graduate study, identifying coping resources, and rating their uses of coping strategies in the Jalowiec coping scale. Content analysis and grouping of the stress situations revealed 5 categories which are: 1) lack of experience in analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation; 2) English language barrier; 3) many assignments in limited timeframe; 4) changing in environment and daily life; and 5) financial and family problems. Coping resources in which the students described as very helpful to them are from the second year master's nursing students, classmate, faculty, and family members. The students used both problem-focused and emotional-focused coping for managing their stress situations. The proportions of coping strategies the students used from the highest to the lowest were confrontive, palliative, and emotive strategies, respectively. Understanding the master's nursing students' stress situations and their coping strategies will help faculty members appropriately deal with them. Rama Nurs J 2000; 6(3) : 193-200.

Keywords: stress, coping strategies, coping resources, graduate nursing students

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Background and Objective

A Master's program in Nursing has been provided by faculty of Ramathibodi School of Nursing, Mahidol University since 1977. After the first curriculum revision[1] in 1992, there are three specialty programs of study: Adult Nursing, Maternity and Newborn Nursing, and Pediatric Nursing. The programs are designed to prepare leaders in the advanced practice roles of clinical nurse specialist, nurse administrator, and nurse educator. As a requirement for graduation, students should complete 30 credits course work and 12 credits for Master's thesis within five years. Course work includes 5 core courses (12 credits), 5 elective courses in nursing specialty (14 credits), and 2 elective courses on role function (4 credits). The teaching and learning approaches emphasis on principles of adult learning and active learning. Throughout the program, the students were expected to gain experience of application and implementation of research results, nursing theories, and related sciences as a scientific base for nursing practice.

During transition from working to graduate study, the new master's students have to encounter with various situations. Some of these situations may be appraised by the students as taxing or exceeding their resources and endangering their well being. As a full-time student at Mahidol University, the master's student is required to register at least nine credits per semester. In the first semester of the graduate nursing study at Ramathibodi School of Nursing, the students have to take 12 credits course work which include: Theoretical Nursing, Health Science, Statistics, and Advanced Nursing in a selected specialization both theory and practice. Many students usually complain and much anxious about their study during the transition. The researchers, as faculty members in the

program, are very concerned for the students' problems because stress and anxiety can effect ones perceptual functions and concentration in learning process[2]. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to investigate stress situations, coping strategies, and coping resources used by the master's students during the first semester of the study. The results from this study will help the faculty understand the students' situations and also be used as informative input for helping and facilitating the transition.

Conceptual Framework

The Lazarus' stress, appraisal, and coping model[3] was used as a conceptual framework for this study. Based on this model, stress is defined as a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by a person as taxing or exceeding his/ her resources and endangering his/ her well-being. Factors influencing appraisal are from both the person and situation. Important personal factors are commitments and beliefs. Situational factors are novelty, predictability, uncertainty about events, temporal factors, and ambiguity. Coping is defined as constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage situations appraised as stressful. Coping has two major functions: problem-focused function and emotional-focused function. The problem-focused function aims to manage or alter the problem generating stress, whereas the emotional-focused function regulates the individual's emotional response to the stressful event. In real-life stressful situations people use both problem and emotion-focused coping strategies.

At the same time, the person may seek and use surrounding resources that are available for helping them in the stress situation. Based on the conceptual framework,

the students' stress is a situation in which the students use cognitive appraisal to evaluate the study in master's program is stressful. Consequently, the master's nursing students use a variety of coping strategies and resources available for managing their study in master's program that appraised as stressful.

Method

Sample and Setting

The sample was the master's nursing students who enrolled in master's program at Ramathibodi School of Nursing in 1997. They were asked to participate in the study by completing the questionnaires on the last day of the first semester of their study.

Instruments

1. The Demographic Questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire includes the questions related to the characteristics of the student such as, age, marital status, any other responsibilities during studying in the master's program, and etc.

2. Open-ended questions. Two open-ended questions were designed to collect data. The first question was used to ask the students to describe the situations they appraised as stressful during their study in the first semester. The second was used to ask the resources in which the students perceived as very helpful to them.

3. The Jalowiec Coping Scale (JCS). The JCS[4] used in this study was developed based on Lazarus's conceptual framework. It is a 36-item self-report instrument design to assess cognitive and behavioral coping during specific situations. The items comprise three subscales lebeled as : Confrontive Coping (13 items), Emotive Coping (9 items), and Palliative Coping (14 items). In Thailand, Suthayakorn[5] translated the original JCS into the Thai language. After that the instrument has been used in many studies. The alpha reliability coefficients[6–8] were between 0.72 and 0.88. In this study, the researcher used the JCS for measuring coping strategies the students use to manage their stress. The students respond on each item on a 5 point likert scale, indicating the frequency with which each strategy is used: from 1 indicates does not apply and/or not used, to 5 indicates used a great deal. The reliability of the scale in this study is 0.79.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data were collected from the master's nursing students on the last day of their study in the first semester. They were asked to recall and describe their study experience that appraised as stress, identified coping resources and then rated on coping strategies they used for managing their stress. Return of the questionnaires served as consent to participate. The data were kept confidential and reported results as group data.

The content analysis[9] and descriptive statistics were used for analyses of qualitative and quantitative data, respectively. The raw scores and relative scores[10] for each coping subscale were computed. A raw score was the sum of the students' responses to the items that comprise a given subscale. The raw scores were used to describe the students' coping efforts for each of the three subscales. A relative score for each coping subscale was computed by first obtaining the mean scores for each subscale, then dividing the mean scores for each subscale by the sum of the mean scores for all three subscales. The raw scores were used to describe the students' coping efforts for each of the three subscale. The relative scores were described to reflect the students' uses of each coping subscale relative to total uses of all coping subscales combined.

Results

Description of the sample

The sample consists of 35 master's students whose age range from 23 to 40 years with a mean age of 30.4 years. Thirty of them are single, only five are married with at least one child. They are all female and full-time students. Around 50 percents of them (17 students) had one to five years working experience after graduation, the others 18 students had experience ranged from 6 to 18 years. Eighteen students are in Adult Nursing major, ten are in Maternity and Newborn Nursing, and seven are in Pediatric Nursing. Twenty-three of them (65.7%) have some other responsibilities during studying in the master's program such as nurturing their child, doing household work, taking care for the sick relative at home, and working extra job for their income.

Stress situations

Content analysis and grouping of the stress situation revealed 5 categories of stress which are: 1) lack of experience in analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation; 2) English language barrier; 3) many assignment in limited time; 4) changes in environment and daily life; and 5) financial and family problems. Data as shown in Table 1 are number and percentages of the stress situations as described by the students. The highest number is in the

Table 1 Number and percentages of the stress situations related to graduate study as described by the master's nursing students (n=35)

Stress situations	N	x
Lack of experience in analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation	12	34.3
English language barrier	9	25.7
Many assignment in limited timeframe	7	20.0
Changes in environment and daily life	4	11.4
Financial and family problems	3	8.6

categories of "lack of experience in analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation" whereas, the lowest number is in the categories of "financial and family problems".

Coping strategies and coping resources

Raw scores and relative scores for each subscale of the JCS were computed. As presented in Table 2, the mean raw scores of the subscales, used by 35 students were as follows: Confrontive coping = 47.43, Emotive coping = 22.77, and Palliative coping = 35.11. It can be noticed that the minimum actual raw score of each subscale was higher than the minimum possible score of each. This can be implied that all students used a combination of three coping subscales.

Table 2 Ranges, Means, and Standard Deviations of Raw Scores of Students' Coping Strategies (n = 35)

Coping Strategies	Min – Max Possible	Actual	M	SD
Confrontive	13 – 65	39 – 56	47.43	4.42
Emotive	9 – 45	15 – 33	22.77	3.67
Palliative	14 – 70	24 – 46	35.11	6.02

Data in Table 3 describe the proportion of students' use of each coping subscale in relation to all three subscales. The relative scores of each subscale were as follows: Confrontive coping, .45; Emotive coping, .22; and Palliative coping, .33. The highest proportion of coping subscale used by the students was Confrontive coping, while the lowest proportion was Emotive coping.

Table 3 Ranges, Means, and Standard Deviations of Relative Scores of Students' Coping Strategies (n = 35)

Coping Strategies	Min–Max	M	SD
Confrontive	.38 – .56	.45	.04
Emotive	.17 – .28	.22	.03
Palliative	.25 – .40	.33	.04

Coping resources that the students described as very useful for them were the second year master's nursing students, their classmate, faculty members, and their families. Data in **Table 4** show numbers and percentages of coping resources described by the master's nursing students. It was noticed that most of the students described more than one resource.

Table 4 Numbers and percentages of coping resources described by the master's nursing students (N=35)

Coping resources	N	x
The second year master's nursing student	32	91.4
Classmate	28	80.0
Faculty member	25	71.4
Family	18	51.4

Discussion

The results as shown in **Table 1** indicated an interesting stress situation that the most students appraised was "Lack of experience in analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation". This may be because the methods of teaching that our faculty believes to be suitable for our graduate program are the methods that provide students an opportunity to practice their cognitive process. Therefore, analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation are usually the methods of teaching and learning in our graduate program. Based on the subjects' demographics, there were 17 master's nursing students who finished their baccalaureate within the last 5 years. These students may easily adapt themselves to the teaching-learning methods because in the past 5 years most of the undergraduate-nursing program integrated problem-based learning and critical thinking as their approaches for teaching and learning. However, some of the master's nursing students, who finished their baccalaureate degree more than 5 years, may have a hard

time to get acquainted to these methods, so they appraise as stress situation for them. This finding supports the Lazarus's model[3] that the situation in which the person has no or less experience, will influent to stress appraisal.

The other two stress situations that the students appraised were "English language barrier" and "many assignments in limited timeframe". In the first semester, all full-time students had to register 12 credits course work which included Theoretical Nursing, Health Science, Statistics, and two courses (theory and practice) of Advanced Nursing in a selected specialization. These courses required two or more major assignments as term paper, and some of these courses also had midterm and final examination. Generally, the students were assigned to read chapters in the required textbooks or articles in journals before attending the class in order to share with other students by presentation, discussion, and analysis of those knowledge and content. In addition, the majority of the advance nursing textbooks and journals required for reading is written in English, the students may spend lots of time to get through and understand the content. Some of them may misinterpret or may not clearly understand the whole content. Consequently, these activities and requirements caused the students to perceive English language as their barrier and feel overwhelm with assignments in limited timeframe.

Besides transition to the role of graduate student, many of subjects were also encounter with a changing environment, especially for the students who came from other provinces of Thailand. They had to arrange for the place where to stay while studying, adjust themselves to their new housing environment, and have difficulty with heavy traffic in Bangkok. Accumulated with the role of new graduate student, these changes have impact on students' daily life. Therefore, the students appraised "Changes in environment

and daily life" as another stress situation for them. Based on subjects' demographics, some students had to responsible for nurturing their child, doing household work, taking care for the sick relative at home, or working extra job for their income. These conditions might be the competing demands during the first semester of study and make the students stress. Thus, some students appraised "Financial and family problems" as their stress.

Based on the raw scores in **Table 2**, all students used a combination of three coping subscales. It can be interpreted that the students use both problem–focused and emotional–focused coping to manage their stress situation. This result supports the Lazarus' model[3] that in any stress situations people usually use both problem– and emotional–focused coping. Moreover, it was found that the highest proportion of coping strategies used by the students to manage their stress was Confrontive coping, while the lowest proportion was Emotive coping. This result also supports the previous coping research[11] under Lazarus' model that the stress situation based on working or studying, people used problem–focused coping more often than emotional–focused coping.

As shown in **Table 4**, coping resources that the students described as very useful for them were the second year master's nursing students, their classmate, faculty members, and their families. More than 80 percent of the students considered that the second year students and their classmates were their resources. This result indicated that resource and support from the ones who had prior experience and from peers who had faced with the same situation were very important. Basically, faculty members of our graduate

program were assigned to be the students' academic advisor for facilitating and helping the students to study throughout the program. Thus, the students can make appointment with their advisor when they need help. Moreover, the students also mentioned that supports and resources from their families were also significant to them.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the study can be used as an informative input to the curriculum committee and the faculty members of the master's program at Ramathibodi School of Nursing. Faculty members of our school have more understanding of the multiple factors that influence master's students' stress. Understanding students' stress situations, coping strategies, and resources can help our faculty deal with them more appropriately.

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for helping the students are as follows:

1. The chairman of each course should write specific purposes, descriptions, and guidelines for analysis, critique, seminar, and presentation in the course syllabus; and faculty member who teaches in class should facilitate or enhance the students' abilities by coaching and practicing them during their first presentation or seminar.

2. The faculty should periodically provide an informal class to teach the students how to effectively read English textbooks or journals by practicing any essential techniques, such as skim and scan.

3. The graduate curriculum committee should brings the issue of "too many assignments with limited timeframe" into consideration for setting up the criteria for appropriate number of paper assignments for each course.

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ความเครียด การเผชิญความเครียด และแหล่งประโยชน์ของนักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทระหว่างการเรียนในภาคการศึกษาแรก

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บทคัดย่อ การวิจัยนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อ ศึกษาความเครียดและการเผชิญความเครียดของนักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทระหว่างการเรียนในภาคการศึกษาแรก โดยใช้ทฤษฎีความเครียดและการเผชิญความเครียดของลาซารัสและโฟคแมนเป็นกรอบแนวคิดของการศึกษา กลุ่มตัวอย่างประกอบด้วยนักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทที่เข้าศึกษาในหลักสูตรพยาบาลศาสตรมหาบัณฑิต ของภาควิชาพยาบาลศาสตร์ คณะแพทยศาสตร์โรงพยาบาลรามาธิบดี ในปีการศึกษา 2539 จำนวน 35 คน ตอบแบบสอบถามเมื่อสิ้นสุดภาคการศึกษาแรก โดยบรรยายสถานการณ์ที่นักศึกษาพิจารณาว่าเป็นความเครียด และตอบแบบสอบถามการเผชิญความเครียดของจาโลวิส สถานการณ์ที่นักศึกษาพิจารณาว่าเป็นความเครียดจัดกลุ่มได้ 5 ประเภทคือ 1) ขาดประสบการณ์ในการวิเคราะห์ วิจารณ์ สัมมนา และการนำเสนอ 2) ปัญหาและอุปสรรคในการอ่าน ทำความเข้าใจภาษาอังกฤษ 3) จำนวนของงานที่ได้รับมอบหมายในแต่ละวิชามีมากในเวลาที่จำกัด 4) การเปลี่ยนแปลงในสิ่งแวดล้อมและชีวิตประจำวัน และ 5) ปัญหาเศรษฐกิจและครอบครัว สำหรับแหล่งประโยชน์ที่นักศึกษารู้สึกว่าสามารถช่วยเหลือได้เป็นอย่างมากคือ ความช่วยเหลือ คำแนะนำจากนักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทชั้นปีที่ 2 เพื่อนร่วมชั้นเรียนคณาจารย์ และสมาชิกในครอบครัว ส่วนวิธีการเผชิญความเครียดที่นักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทได้ใช้ในการจัดการกับปัญหา พบว่ามีการใช้วิธีการเผชิญความเครียดทั้งแบบการเผชิญหน้ากับปัญหา การปรับภาวะอารมณ์ และการบรรเทาความรู้สึกเครียด ผลที่ได้จากการวิจัยนำไปเป็นข้อมูลแก่คณาจารย์และหลักสูตรในการปรับปรุงระบบให้การช่วยเหลือนักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโทเพื่อการปรับตัวในการศึกษา

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คำสำคัญ ความเครียด การเผชิญความเครียด แหล่งประโยชน์ นักศึกษาพยาบาลปริญญาโท

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