

A Socio-Psychological Exploration of National Training Service Program (NSTP) Students' Coping and Support-Seeking in Mental Health Challenges

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Abstract

Due to academic pressures, societal expectations, and the long-lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, college students' mental health problems have gotten worse in recent years. In the Philippines, these concerns have been noted alongside shifts in help-seeking behaviors and heightened awareness of mental health issues among young learners. In this situation, it's important to know how pupils deal with stress and use support services. The National Service Training Program, which focuses on civic participation, leadership, and community involvement, creates a special social and psychological space where people can learn how to cope and ask for help. This study examines the experiences of NSTP students in navigating mental health difficulties, emphasizing their coping strategies, support-seeking behaviors, and resilience sources. Utilizing Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, the study examines the interaction of individual beliefs, emotional responses, and social settings in influencing students' well-being. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with deliberately chosen NSTP students and later analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings aim to clarify emotional difficulties, efficient coping strategies, and the critical impact of parental, peer, and institutional support.

Keywords: coping mechanisms, mental health, NSTP students, support-seeking, socio-psychological

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Introduction

Mental health among students has emerged as a vital issue in educational research and policy deliberations of the schools. According to Li et al. (2022), academic settings frequently have high standards and a lot of work to do, which can lead to a lot of stress, anxiety, and burnout. For Albandia et al.; (2024) and Asiones (2023), the major shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic made these problems worse because students had to deal with being alone, tech problems, and breaks in their usual support networks. Experts in the Philippines have observed a sudden increase in the access and incidence of mental health disorders among the students during and subsequent to the pandemic, accompanied by shifts in stigma and help-seeking behaviors according to Bollettino et al. (2023) and Asiones (2023). On the other hand, maladaptive coping (such avoidance and rumination) is linked to negative mental health indicators (Down but Never Out, 2022; Li et al., 2022).

The socio-psychological dimension is particularly important like coping and the quest for support are not solely individual psychological occurrences; they are shaped by social context, expectations, cultural norms, and institutional policies. For example, the stress students feel is greatly affected by the academic expectations of their parents, teachers, and their own internalized ideals. However, having supportive relationships and psychological tools like self-compassion or resilience will lessen the effects, as noted by Academic Expectation, Self-Compassion, etc. (2020) and Li et al. (2022). According to Albandia et al. (2024) and Asiones (2023), the post-pandemic environment still poses new problems, such as uncertainty, different teaching styles, and worries about reintegration. All of these things make it harder for students to cope and hurt their mental health.

Perhaps providing a unique framework for analyzing these processes, the Philippines' National Service Training Program seeks to promote civic awareness and community engagement among teenagers. This gave children structured opportunities to interact with one another, take charge, perform community service, and receive school support, all of which may have an impact on how they handle mental health issues (Custodio et al., 2025). By examining the coping strategies and help-seeking behaviors of the NSTP students dealing with mental health issues, as well as the sociopsychological elements that support or undermine resilience, this study aims to close the existing gap.

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Literature Review

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualized Social Cognitive Theory as a dynamic process that arises from the interaction between the individual and their environment. According to their theory, stress occurs when an individual appraises a situation as exceeding their resources for coping. They presented two principal coping strategies: problem-focused coping, which entails taking immediate action to mitigate the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which emphasizes the regulation of emotional suffering. The model also stresses how important social support is as a moderating element that can lessen the bad effects of stress and boost mental resilience.

Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory adds to this paradigm by showing how personal beliefs, social influences, and behaviors work together to form how people cope and ask for help. Self-efficacy is a key idea in Bandura's theory. It means believing that you can handle problems and reach your goals. Students who have faith in themselves are more likely to employ adaptive coping methods, stay going when things get tough, and ask for help when they need it. Bandura also discussed about reciprocal determinism, which shows how personal traits, behavior, and the environment all effect one another. This indicates that having a supportive environment, such peer networks or institutional programs, can help someone deal with stress better. On the other hand, taking proactive steps to deal with stress can boost someone's confidence and social ties. These themes together made up the socio-psychological framework of the current study, which looks into how NSTP students deal with mental health issues and how different support systems affect their resilience and well-being.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design, utilizing an interpretive approach, to capture the lived experiences of NSTP students in managing their mental health challenges.

Participants

Out of 385 NSTP Students in attendance, fifteen students were selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen based on their willingness to discuss personal experiences and their active involvement in NSTP activities in Iligan Medical Center College, Palao, Iligan City.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to encourage participants to share their thoughts in detail.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed. Data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into themes representing coping mechanisms, emotions, and social support experiences.

Results and Discussions

This section shows the result of the interview and goes into great detail about the outcomes. It analyzes the data collected in relation to the research objectives and examines their implications, substantiated by pertinent literature and observations.

Emotional Struggles

NSTP students shared experiences of sadness, exhaustion, and emotional instability due to academic and personal pressures: "Sometimes, I just cry alone in my room. It's the only way to feel lighter before studying again" (P5).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert in their Stress and Coping Transactional Model, the emotional responses occur when perceived stress surpasses available coping resources. Students in the NSTP program face emotional difficulties stemming from the convergence of responsibilities, academic obligations, community involvement, and personal aspirations. P5's experience shows that emotional anguish can show itself as crying, withdrawing, or feeling burned out. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) assert that stress arises when an individual perceives a situation as excessively demanding relative to their coping abilities. The emotional expression acts as a way to deal with stress and get back to normal. Crying, often referred to as emotional ventilation, corresponds with emotion-focused coping mechanisms that emphasize emotional relief rather than problem-solving. In the NSTP, where civic duty and self-reflection are important, people may feel emotional stress because they are trying to do their duties while also dealing with their feelings. This shows that NSTP programs need to have structured psychosocial support to help students deal with their feelings in a healthy way. Adding activities that are sensitive to mental health could help children control their emotions and feel stronger. Realizing that showing feelings is not a sign of weakness but a technique to deal with things could help student volunteers' mental health and make them more likely to ask for help. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Folkman and Moskowitz (2004), the understanding connects the personal and the emotional regulation to large institutional care systems that support student well-being through community-focused programs.

Academic Pressure

Academic demands and performance expectations were strong stressors for many NSTP students, often causing anxiety and self-doubt: "Even if I try my best, I feel like it is never enough. The pressure to do well keeps me awake at night" (P11).

Students' experiences show how the constant pressure to do well in school and the amount of work they have to do can hurt their mental health. P11's statement shows the mismatch between motivation and tiredness, when working hard doesn't feel gratifying anymore. The Yerkes-Dodson Law (1908) says that some stress can help people get things done, but too much stress makes them anxious, keeps them from sleeping, and makes them tired mentally. In the NSTP setting, where civic duties and coursework come together, this effect is even stronger. Students typically have to balance community service with schoolwork, which makes it hard to manage their time. The belief that you need to do well in school and in social situations leads to a cycle of self-doubt and dread of failure. If not dealt with, this emotional tiredness could lead to burnout. Schools and colleges need to know what this level of stress is and make sure that students have a good mix of work and assistance from teachers. Promoting self-compassion, mindfulness, and setting achievable goals can alleviate detrimental stress. Teaching students about mental health as part of NSTP activities could also help them understand their boundaries when it comes to stress and build resilience, so they perceive performance as growth instead of perfection (Schaufeli et al., 2009; Yerkes & Dodson, 1908).

Social and Family Factors

Family and peer relationships shaped how students coped with stress and maintained their mental health: "When my mother listens to me, even just for a few minutes, it already feels like a big help" (P6).

The ability of the students to deal with stress was greatly affected by the support they got from their families and friends. Participant 6's simple statement highlights how emotional support

from family can help lower stress levels. As asserted by Bronfenbrenner (1979), an individual's microsystem, which includes family, friends, and peers, is essential for fostering emotional resilience. When students comprehend these systems, their capacity to navigate academic and personal problems is enhanced. On the other hand, not getting help can make you feel even more alone and helpless. In the NSTP environment, where community involvement typically reflects household cooperation, relational support becomes a model for empathy and social responsibility. Encouraging open communication at home and at school lets pupils talk about their problems before they get worse. This is in line with Filipino collectivist ideals that stress "kapwa" (shared identity) and caring for each other. Programs that involve parental involvement or peer mentoring can help students outside of school. These kinds of programs show how important it is for students' mental health and social belonging to be connected, which is important for their long-term health and growth.

Anxiety and Fear

Many participants expressed constant worry about failure and self-comparison, leading to emotional tension and insecurity: "I always compare myself to others. I feel like I'll never be good enough" (P8).

Fear typically comes from comparing yourself to others and feeling like you're not good enough. The statement of Participant 8 shows how social norms and comparing oneself to others can lead to worry that is felt within. Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory posits that individuals' views in their skills influence their approach to challenges. When students are often comparing themselves to others, they start to feel less competent, which makes them anxious, puts off work, and makes them retreat. In the NSTP program, working together and being able to see how well you do can make these feelings stronger if students think they are less capable of helping.

So, teachers and facilitators need to make sure that learning and community participation are safe for everyone and that everyone feels welcome. Students are more likely to focus on group success when they do tasks that are more cooperative than competitive. Giving NSTP students affirmations and constructive feedback makes them feel more confident and less anxious. In the end, encouraging a development attitude helps students perceive failures as chances to learn instead of threats to their self-esteem.

Coping Through Support

Talking to trusted people and seeking comfort from peers provided emotional relief for many students: "Just having someone listen makes me feel lighter, it's like I can breathe again" (P14).

Participants often found emotional relief through support from others, friends and even from the family. The statement of Participant 14 captures the spirit of being recognized and understood. The Person-Centered Theory of Rogers' (1951) emphasizes that authentic empathy and acceptance enable individuals to regain self-esteem and emotional stability. This further emphasize that peer sharing, group reflection, and collaborative initiatives within the NSTP framework has great impact on therapeutic environments a very conducive to natural listening and validation. These interactions help people feel like they belong and support each other, which is vital for keeping their emotions in check.

When students talk about their problems, they let go of some of the stress they are feeling inside, which makes them feel better. This fits with Filipino cultural qualities like *pakikipagkapwa* (shared humanity), which encourages emotional solidarity. Structured peer talks and guidance counseling integration in NSTP sessions may help students become more empathetic and caring. Creating safe spaces for communication also helps to get rid of the stigma that comes with talking about mental health, which makes it easier to ask for help. This relational way of dealing with things shows both psychological and cultural ways to heal and evolve as a person.

Faith and Inner Strength

Spirituality and faith became important sources of hope and calmness for several students: “When everything feels heavy, I just pray. It helps me feel safe again” (P7).

Faith has become a very personal way for NSTP students to deal with stress, showing both cultural and individual strength. The statement of Participant 7 illustrates how prayer helps individuals in regulating their emotions, gain a positive impact, and discovering significance in their existence. Pargament (1997) explains that religious coping helps people see problems in the context of a bigger goal, which gives them a sense of direction when they are upset. For Filipino youth, whose faith and family are closely linked, spirituality can help them feel better and provide them a sense of order during tough times. Spirituality strengthens virtues like service, appreciation, and perseverance in the NSTP curriculum, which generally includes community and moral development. Faith-based coping may not remove stress, but it might change it into something that is easier to deal with, which can help you handle your emotions better. To encourage a wide range of beliefs, institutions would want to think about integrating introspective techniques like mindfulness or debates based on principles. It is excellent for mental health and promotes inclusivity to encourage people to talk about their spirituality without making them follow a certain set of ideas. Faith, when combined with social support, ultimately fortifies optimism and enhances inner stability, which is essential for students managing both academic and civic duties.

Relaxation and Distraction

Many NSTP students managed their stress through leisure activities, hobbies, and short breaks to restore emotional balance: “When I feel overwhelmed, I just listen to music or draw. It helps me forget my problems for a while” (P13).

Students learned that relaxing and doing creative things helped them feel less emotionally tired. The statement of Participant 13 indicates that people can feel better when they are sad by doing artworks or listening to music. Lewinsohn's Behavioral Activation Theory (1974) asserts that deliberate effort amplifies positive reinforcement, hence alleviating negative emotional states. In the context of NSTP, where academic and social responsibilities converge, periods of leisure and relaxation become essential. These things are not only distractions; they are also planned ways to take care of yourself that help you get your mind back in balance. You can relax and minimize your risk of burnout by listening to music, writing in a journal, or spending time outside. Promoting these habits in schools can make relaxation a normal part of keeping your mental health up to date. Also, doing things for fun can boost creativity, which can lead to better community service and project planning in NSTP. Institutions can assist students deal with stress and stay motivated and mentally stable throughout their academic path by adding wellness breaks or creative workshops.

Self-Reflection and Growth

Several participants developed personal insight and emotional awareness through journaling and reflection on their experiences: “Writing about my feelings helps me understand why I feel that way and what I can do next time” (P10).

Self-reflection allowed NSTP students to explore themselves and learn how to deal with their feelings. Participant 10 said that it shows how strong reflective writing can be for making thoughts and feelings clearer. Mezirow's (1991) Transformative Learning Theory posits that critical reflection empowers individuals to extract meaning from their experiences and adjust their behaviors accordingly. The NSTP program not only encourages students to think about what they have done, but it also includes diaries and discussions after activities as part of the curriculum. These exercises help kids learn what makes them feel awful and how to turn issues into opportunities to grow. This internal dialogue cultivates self-efficacy, maturity, and empathy, which are fundamental goals of civic engagement education. Encouraging introspective exercises in NSTP helps students become more emotionally literate, which means they can better express their stress, find solutions, and deal with other people's feelings. In the end, keeping a notebook and thinking about yourself make you more resilient and help you think forward. This fits with the goals of holistic education, which sees intellectual and emotional growth as two important parts of student achievement.

Institutional Support

Students highlighted the importance of institutional programs and accessible guidance services to support mental health: “Sometimes we just need someone from the school to check on us or remind us that help is there” (P3).

NSTP students stressed that being involved in an organization is important for keeping mental wellness. P3's statement shows that institutions need to be proactive instead of reactive when there are problems. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory posits that institutions such as schools constitute a component of the mesosystem that directly impacts development. For Cohen and Wills (1985), contend that the perceived availability of social support serves as a coping mechanism against stress. Schools improve students' sense of belonging and safety when they offer mental health initiatives including counseling, peer mentoring, and campaigns to raise awareness. The NSTP's focus on civic engagement makes it a great place to teach psychosocial skills through group reflections, outreach programs, and leadership training. Also, regular communication between teachers and students builds trust and makes it more likely that students would ask for help early on. Institutional compassion thus serves as both a preventative and developing strategy. Incorporating mental health policy in higher education not only meets immediate needs but also fosters long-term resilience, ensuring that students excel academically, socially, and emotionally.

Collective Healing

Group interactions and community projects within NSTP fostered solidarity, empathy, and shared emotional recovery among students: “It feels healing when we help each other and share our stories, it reminds me I'm not alone” (P11).

One of the most important things that came out of NSTP was collective healing. P11's statement shows how shared experiences can help people feel like they belong and relieve their emotions.

Durkheim's (1897) Social Integration Theory posits that robust social connections safeguard individuals against psychological suffering and promote resilience. NSTP develops an environment that is like therapeutic group procedures by having group service projects, reflection sessions, and collaboration. The sense of unity and purpose helps students see their problems as part of being human, not as a failing on their own. This shared experience builds empathy and trust amongst people, both of which are important for civic engagement. Group reflection lets the students share their feelings and celebrate their accomplishments together at the same time, turning suffering into connection and learning. It is by encouraging of every students through peer support circles inside NSTP can make this healing dynamic a part of the organization, converting service activities into places where people can heal emotionally. The program not only develops awareness of civic issues by linking community work with caring for others, but it also promotes general health, making mental health an integral aspect of building a nation.

Findings

The results show that NSTP kids have serious mental health problems because of the stress of school, having to do a lot of things, comparing themselves to others, and adjusting to life after the epidemic. A lot of the people who took part said they felt anxious, emotionally drained, unsure of themselves, depressed, and afraid of failing. Academic obligations became a significant stressor, frequently leading to sleep difficulties, weariness, and the need to fulfill elevated expectations. Also, comparing themselves to their counterparts made them feel more insecure and anxious, which hurt their confidence and overall health even more. Even though they had to deal with these problems, students showed strength by using both emotion-focused and problem-focused coping mechanisms. They were able to deal with and control their emotional turmoil by crying, praying, listening to music, doing creative things, journaling, and reflecting on themselves. Problem-focused techniques, such as managing time, getting help with schoolwork, and taking care of things before they become problems, helped students deal with stressors better. Reflective practices, especially journaling and NSTP-guided reflections, were very important for helping people become more aware of themselves and evolve as people. Social support turned out to be a very important protective element. Family, especially parents, provide emotional support that made stress less and resilience stronger. Peer support in NSTP helped kids feel less alone by building empathy, understanding, and a sense of belonging. Institutional support services were also seen as important, but participants stressed that schools need to do more to assist mental health. Faith and spirituality also helped people get through hard times by giving them comfort, hope, and significance. NSTP activities, especially those that got students involved in their communities, helped them heal emotionally, connect with others, and find a sense of purpose. This shows how the program could help both civic development and student well-being.

Conclusion

The results show that NSTP students have a lot of mental problems because of the stress they encountered in their day-to-day living, comparing themselves to others, having too many duties, and adjusting to life after the epidemic. Sadness, anxiety, self-doubt, and tiredness were frequent feelings, and they were often made worse by high expectations and dread of failure.

Even though these were hard, pupils showed a lot of different ways to cope. Crying, praying, listening to music, writing in a notebook, and thinking about oneself are all examples of emotion-focused coping strategies that helped control emotional distress. There were also signs

of problem-focused coping mechanisms, such as managing time and asking for help. Social assistance became a key role in keeping people safe. Family, friends, and other trusted people gave emotional support, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, which helped lower stress levels a lot. When institutional support was clear and easy to go to, it made students even more resilient.

Faith and spirituality has great significance in contribution to the cultivation of optimism and emotional stability, paralleling the cultural context of Filipino pupils. Additionally, collective healing through group interactions in NSTP activities developed empathy, solidarity, and communal resilience. These results concluded that coping mechanisms and help-seeking behaviors are influenced by individual psychological processes, as well as by social interactions, cultural values, and institutional contexts. These results demonstrate that coping methods and help-seeking behaviors are influenced by individual psychological characteristics as well as social interactions, cultural values, and institutional contexts.

To conclude, NSTP serves not only as a civic engagement program but also as a potential psychosocial support platform. When supported by structured mental health initiatives, NSTP can significantly contribute to students' emotional well-being, resilience, and holistic development.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, a number of suggestions are made to improve the mental health support system for NSTP students. Facilitators and coordinators who run NSTP are encouraged to add structured psychosocial elements to the program, such as guided reflection sessions, peer support circles, stress management workshops, and mental health awareness discussions. This will make sure that civic engagement activities also promote emotional health. To make it easier for people to get help when they need it, NSTP coordinators and guidance counselors should work together more closely to set up frequent mental health check-ins, outreach counseling services, and peer mentorship programs that make asking for help seem normal. Colleges and universities should make mental health services available to everyone without stigma, encourage students to have balanced academic workloads, and teach staff to see indicators of emotional distress in students early on. Schools can also help students grow in all areas by offering wellness activities, seminars on strengthening resilience, and creative workshops. Families and local communities should encourage open communication and build up youth support programs that fit with NSTP aims. This will give the students emotional assistance outside of school. Policymakers should keep making it easier for colleges and universities to follow the Philippine Mental Health Act, also known as R.A. 11036, by giving enough money to mental health programs on campus and including psychosocial education in service-learning projects. Finally, for the coming researchers, they are encouraged to conduct quantitative, mixed-method, or longitudinal studies to attain the lasting impacts of NSTP participation on students' resilience, coping strategies, and overall mental health.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing program, was used to check the work for errors and improve the wording. The only things that could be done were fixing spelling and grammar mistakes and rewording statements to make them clearer and more accurate. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted

technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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