Coping Skills and Psychological Well-being: A Systematic Review of BRIEF-COPE Utilization in Malaysia

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Abstract
Coping strategies significantly influence psychological well-being, particularly in culturally diverse contexts such as Malaysia. While the BRIEF-COPE inventory is widely used to assess coping styles, no recent synthesis has examined how Malaysians across different populations use these strategies or how they relate to mental health outcomes. This systematic review aimed to synthesize the utilization of available evidence on coping strategies measured by the BRIEF-COPE in Malaysian populations and to synthesize evidence their association with psychological well-being outcomes. In accordance with the PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search was conducted across three electronic databases, Scopus, PubMed, and ScienceDirect for studies published between 2019 and 2023. A total of 20 peer-reviewed articles were selected based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A thematic synthesis approach was employed to integrate the findings. Three dominant coping themes were identified: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping. Problem-focused strategies, such as planning and active coping, were consistently associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and distress, particularly among healthcare workers and caregivers. Emotion-focused coping showed mixed outcomes; adaptive forms (e.g., acceptance, religious coping) were

sometimes beneficial, while maladaptive forms (e.g., venting, self-blame) were associated with increased psychological distress. Avoidant coping was consistently linked to negative outcomes across all populations. Subgroup differences emerged based on occupation, age group, and COVID-19 context. The findings highlight the importance of addressing mental health through population-specific and culturally sensitive approaches in Malaysia. Emphasis should be placed on fostering problem-solving and resilience, reducing reliance on avoidant coping strategies, and recognizing culturally relevant forms of coping to support psychological well-being.

Keywords: Problem-Focused, Emotion-Focused, Avoidance, Coping

Introduction

Coping Skills

Coping skills refer to the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral mechanisms individuals employ to manage stress, adversity, and life challenges (Algorani & Gupta, 2023). These skills are pivotal in determining how well individuals adapt to difficult situations and maintain psychological well-being. Studies shows that effective coping strategies significantly reduce the adverse effects of stress, while maladaptive strategies can exacerbate negative outcomes (Rodrigues & Morouço, 2023). Globally, the significance of coping skills has garnered attention due to increasing stressors in modern life, particularly in education, healthcare and populations experiencing socioeconomic hardship (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2025; Rink et al., 2023; Kirkbride et al., 2024).

Coping skills can be generally classified into three types: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidance coping. Problem-focused coping involves actively addressing the stressor through planning, problem-solving, or seeking instrumental support. This has been especially observed among high-pressure professions, such as healthcare workers (Abdullah & Lim, 2016). Emotion-focused coping targets the regulation of emotional responses. This strategy can be adaptive, such as seeking emotional support, or maladaptive, such as self-blame or denial (Stanisławski, 2019). Finally, avoidance coping involves distancing oneself from the stressor or denying it altogether. It is consistently associated with adverse psychological outcomes, including heightened depression and anxiety, predominantly in populations exposed to prolonged or overwhelming stress (Rahman et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, studies on coping mechanism have gained growing attention considering increased mental health concerns, particularly among vulnerable populations. In 2019, National Health Morbidity Survey (NHMS) by the Malaysian Ministry of Health found that about 29% of Malaysians experience mental health issues, driven by factors such as work-related pressure, financial stress, and personal relationships (NHMS, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified the role of coping strategies as many individuals opted to a variety of adaptive and maladaptive strategies to cope with isolation, fear, and uncertainty (Chan et al., 2022).

This review was motivated by the absence of a systematic synthesis examining how BRIEF-COPE coping strategies are employed across diverse Malaysian populations and how they relate to psychological well-being. As mental health challenges intensify in Malaysia, particularly considering recent public health and socioeconomic stressors, this study addresses a timely and significant research gap (NHMS, 2019; Chan et al., 2022). By

consolidating findings from the past five years, it contributes a culturally informed understanding of coping trends, highlights population-specific patterns, and offers practical insights for designing targeted mental health interventions and policies.

Psychological well-Being
Psychological well-being is a multifaceted concept encompassing life satisfaction, emotional stability, and the ability to manage daily stressors effectively. Ryff's model of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) outlines six key dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. High levels of psychological well-being are associated with better greater social support, physical health, and increased resilience in the face of adversity (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

In the Malaysian context, psychological well-being has emerged as a significant concern, particularly among high-stress populations such as university students and healthcare workers. Healthcare professionals frequently experience burnout due to challenging workloads and emotional exhaustion (Ismail et al., 2020). Recent studies highlight the increasing prevalence of mental health issues among Malaysian youth, underscoring the need for better coping strategies to address these concerns (Ali et al., 2024).

University students are another vulnerable group. They often experience chronic stress related to financial instability, academic performance, and interpersonal difficulties, all of which are liked with the impairment of psychological well-being (Shahira et al., 2018). Studies have also shown that emotional intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping psychological well-being, predominantly through its influence on the way individuals cope with stress. Zaki et al. (2023) found that emotional intelligence is positively associated with both psychological well-being and adaptive coping strategies, further reinforcing the link between how individuals perceive and regulate emotions and their overall mental health outcomes.

BRIEF-COPE Inventory
The BRIEF-COPE inventory is a widely utilized self-report tool designed to evaluate how individuals respond to stress. It was developed by Carver (1997) as a shortened version of the original Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced (COPE) inventory, offering a time-efficient yet comprehensive assessment of 14 distinct coping strategies. These include active coping, planning, use of emotional and instrumental support, acceptance, denial self-blame, religion, humor, substance use, positive reframing, behavioral disengagement, self-distraction, and venting (Carver, 1989).

The applicability of BRIEF-COPE in Malaysia is further supported by its demonstrated utilization across various population groups. For instance, studies have shown that healthcare workers commonly employ problem-focused coping to manage occupational stress, whereas university students more frequently rely on emotion-focused coping. Meanwhile, members of the general population, particularly those experiencing economic hardship, tend to employ avoidance coping, which is often associated with poorer psychological consequences (Rahman et al., 2021; Shahira et al., 2018; Abdullah & Lim, 2016). This variation in coping patterns across populations underlines the utilization of BRIEF-COPE as a culturally adaptable and diagnostically versatile instrument in the Malaysian context.

Its psychometric reliability in Malaysian samples has been confirmed. For instance, Yusoff (2010) validated the Malay version of BRIEF-COPE among adolescents, reporting a Cronbach's alpha of 0.85. Whereas Yew et al. (2022) found alpha values between 0.60 and 0.88 in Malaysian caregivers. Its wide availability in the Malay language further augments its cultural appropriateness for Malaysian populations (Yusoff, 2010). Due to its versatility, strong validation record, and multidimensional structure, BRIEF-COPE was selected as the central instrument of analysis for this review.

Research Objective
Given the widespread utilizations of the BRIEF-COPE in Malaysian research, this systematic review aimed to evaluate coping strategies assessed using the instrument across various Malaysian populations and to synthesize evidence their association with psychological well-being outcomes. Specifically, it sought to:
1. Identify the most frequently used coping strategies (problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidance) across different population groups.
2. Synthesize evidence on how these strategies relate to psychological well-being outcomes.
3. Highlight trends, subgroup differences, and research gaps within the 2019–2023 literature.
The guiding research question was: What coping strategies, as measured by the BRIEF-COPE instrument, are most utilized across various Malaysian populations, and how are these strategies associated with psychological well-being outcomes between 2019 and 2023?

Methodology
The Systematic Literature Review constitutes a methodological approach employed for gathering and consolidating antecedent research endeavors with the aim of addressing articulated research questions. This method follows a systematic procedure encompassing the identification, synthesis, analysis, and interpretation of findings derived from the chosen antecedent studies (Liberati et al., 2009). Researchers delineate specific criteria for selecting literature to ascertain its pertinence and interconnectedness with the discussed subject matter. In this study, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework was employed as a guiding framework. PRISMA is widely utilized in systematic research and meta-analyses due to its transparent, structured, and comprehensive nature, facilitating the synthesis of literature (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy
A comprehensive systematic search was conducted between January and March 2024 across three electronic databases: Scopus, PubMed, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected due to their broad coverage of multidisciplinary peer-reviewed literature in health, psychology, and social sciences.

The search was limited to studies published between 2019 and 2023, in English, and conducted within the Malaysian context. No grey literature, theses, or unpublished studies were included.

Search terms were tailored to each database to optimize results. Boolean operators (AND, OR) and truncation were applied where appropriate. An example of a typical search string used in Scopus was:

("coping strategies" OR "coping skills*" OR "coping behavior*" OR "coping mechanism*") AND ("psychological well-being" OR "mental health" OR "mental well-being") AND ("BRIEF-COPE" OR "Brief Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced")

In PubMed, Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms were included to refine the search, while in ScienceDirect, filters for article type and subject area (psychology, health sciences) were applied.

All retrieved records were exported to Microsoft Excel for screening and de-duplication. No manual searches of reference lists or grey literature sources were conducted.

Screening and Eligibility Criteria
The inclusion criteria for this review were as follows:
1. Original research articles involving Malaysian populations
2. Use of the BRIEF-COPE inventory to assess coping strategies
3. Reporting of psychological well-being or mental health outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, stress, resilience)
4. Articles published between 2019 and 2023
5. Articles published in English

Exclusion criteria included
1. Studies not conducted in Malaysia
2. Theoretical papers, protocols, reviews, letter to editor, commentary or opinion articles
3. Studies using other coping measures (not BRIEF-COPE)
4. Studies not reporting psychological well-being or related outcomes

All records were screened by the author at both the title/abstract and full-text levels. The selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Although the screening process was conducted by a single reviewer due to resource limitations, inclusion and exclusion criteria were strictly applied to minimize potential bias. The full selection process is outlined in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Quality Appraisal and Risk of Bias
The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using the relevant Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklists based on study design. This process allowed for the identification of potential sources of bias and supported the interpretation of findings. While formal scoring was not applied, overall study quality was considered during narrative synthesis (Aromataris et al., 2024).

This paper is organized as follows: following the introduction part, a second part is a literature review with theoretical and empirical studies that shed a light on the linkage between theory and practice. The third part introduces the background information on research and methodology. After analysis and findings of the study, authors provide discussions and implications. Finally, this paper concludes with conclusions, recommendations, future research directions and limitations.
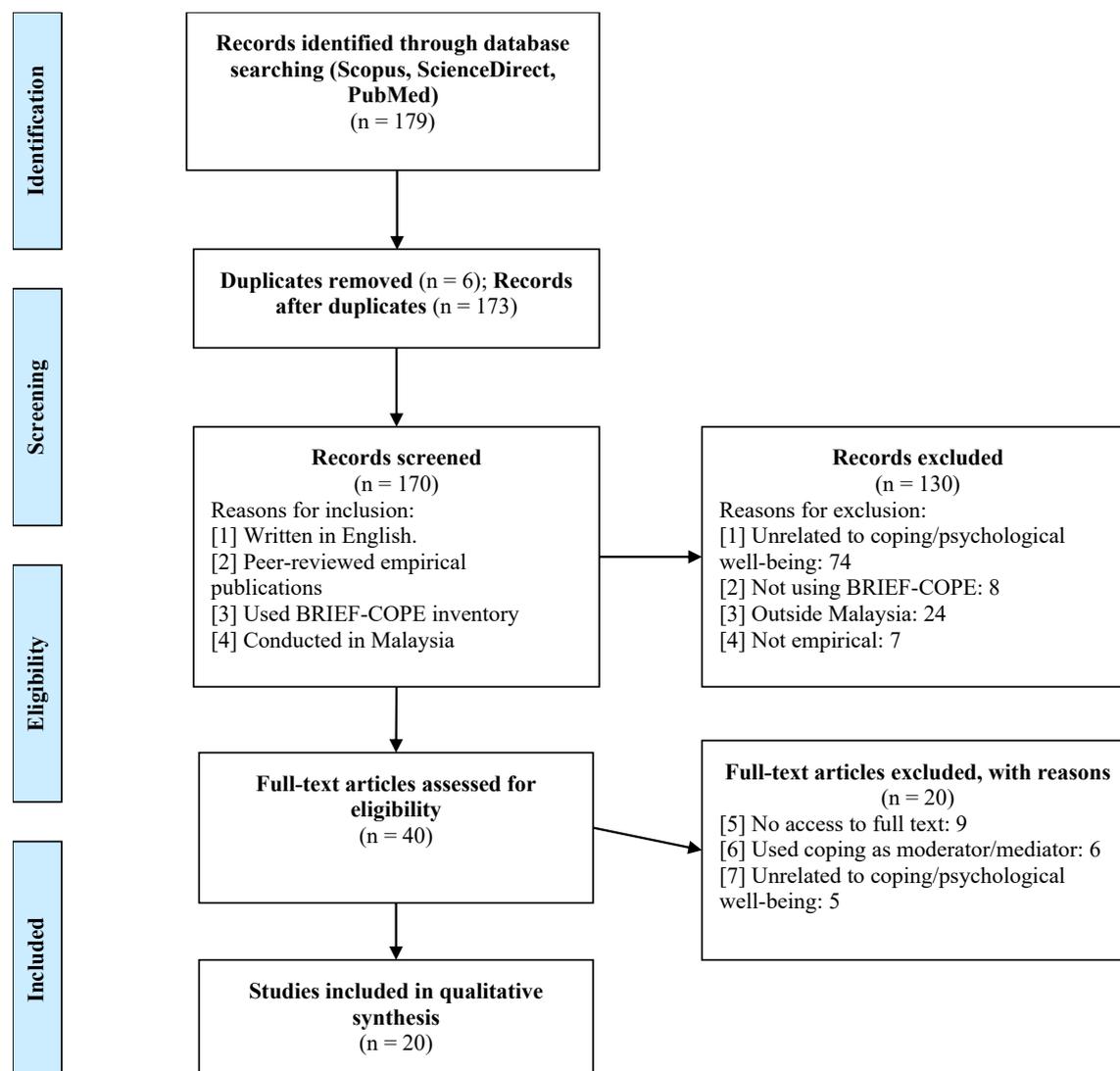
Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram 2020; *Source:* Authors

Findings and Discussions

Overview of Included Studies

A total of 20 empirical studies conducted in Malaysia between 2019 and 2023 were included in this systematic review. All studies employed the BRIEF-COPE inventory to assess coping strategies in relation to various indicators of psychological well-being, including stress, depression, anxiety, burnout, and resilience.

The studies represented a diverse range of populations. Medical and university students were the most frequently studied group (n = 8), followed by healthcare workers (n = 2), caregivers (n = 2), and other populations including adolescents in orphanages, patients undergoing methadone maintenance therapy (MMT), COVID-19 patients, LGBT+ individuals, and oil and gas workers. Sample sizes ranged from 42 to 842 participants. In terms of study design, the majority were cross-sectional studies (n = 17), while two were randomized controlled trials (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2019; Murukesu et al., 2021), and one was a multi-center cross-sectional study (Roslan et al., 2021). The studies primarily used self-administered online or paper-based questionnaires to collect data.

Coping strategies were assessed through the BRIEF-COPE, with reported focus on different combinations of problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidant, adaptive, maladaptive, and religious coping styles. While most studies used the full BRIEF-COPE scale, a few reported categorizing items into higher-order domains such as "approach vs. avoidant" or "adaptive vs. maladaptive." Psychological outcomes were measured using validated tools such as DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale), GHQ-12 (General Health Questionnaire), and domain-specific questionnaires on resilience, burnout, and suicidal behavior such as Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale, Copenhagen Burnout Inventory and Suicidal Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised.

Half of the included studies (n = 10) were conducted within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how individuals coped with challenges such as quarantine, health-related anxiety, academic disruption, and occupational stress. Overall, the included studies provided insight into the use of coping strategies across Malaysian populations, highlighting consistent associations between coping styles and psychological outcomes. These studies formed the basis for the thematic synthesis and subgroup synthesis presented in the following sections.

Thematic Synthesis
Three dominant patterns of coping emerged: problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidance coping. These strategies were associated with diverse psychological outcomes such as anxiety, depression, stress, resilience, and psychological distress, depending on the population and context as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Studies investigating coping strategies using BRIEF-COPE across various Malaysian populations and their association with psychological well-being outcomes

Author (Date)	Aim of Study/ Objective	Sample Size	Findings
Ismail et al. (2021)	To examine the prevalence of psychological distress and its association with coping strategies among medical interns in Malaysia.	431	The majority of participants employed problem-focused strategies such as acceptance and positive reframing. Psychological distress was significantly associated with sociodemographic factors.
Mohammadzadeh et al. (2020)	whether a life skills-based education could improve coping skills among adolescents in Malaysian orphanages.	300	Life skills education led to significant improvements in coping, particularly in reducing maladaptive strategies such as denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame.
Kumar et al. (2022)	To investigate the prevalence of anxiety and depression among psychiatric HCWs and evaluate its association with socio-demographic, socio-economic, work-	173	Approach-oriented coping was the most frequently used strategy among psychiatric healthcare workers and was significantly correlated with lower levels of anxiety and depression.

	related factors and coping strategies.		
Kamarulbahri et al. (2022)	To explore the use of coping strategies and their correlations to socio-demographic features, psychological distress, and social support among the caregivers of patients with schizophrenia.	210	Emotion-focused and problem-focused coping strategies were associated with lower psychological distress, whereas avoidant coping was linked to increased distress levels.
Murukesu et al. (2021)	To evaluate the compare physical activity patterns, psychological wellbeing and coping strategies of older persons with cognitive frailty in the "WE-RISE" trial (intervention versus control) throughout this period.	42	Participants in the intervention group showed improved physical activity, independence, and psychological well-being, with planning and humor identified as contributing strategies.
Yew et al. (2022)	To analyze the relationship between the mood, physical activity, coping, and mental health of Malaysians during the COVID-19 pandemic.	842	Adaptive coping styles and positive mood were associated with improved mental health outcomes, while avoidant coping predicted higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress.
Juhari et al. (2022)	To examine the association between coping strategies as well as the sociodemographic factors of LGBT+ individuals with mental disorders and quantify the occurrence of mental disorders among them.	152	Among LGBT+ individuals, 80.3% were found to have a mental disorder. Problem-focused coping reduced mental health risks, while emotion-focused coping and bisexual identity were linked to greater risk.
Lee et al. (2022)	To assess the anxiety levels and coping strategies among staff and students of a tertiary educational institution during the COVID-19 pandemic and determined the association between anxiety level and coping strategies.	434	Most respondents showed minimal anxiety symptoms; however, maladaptive coping strategies such as self-distraction and venting were associated with increased anxiety levels.
Masiran et al. (2018)	To explore the associations between coping styles and psychological stress involving medical students at Universiti Putra Malaysia.	384	A prevalence of 15.6% psychological stress was observed, with high levels of venting and self-blame showing significant associations with stress.
Ismail et al. (2023)	To explore the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and	137	High prevalence of depression, anxiety, and stress was reported

	stress as well as evaluate the associations of these mental disorders with sociodemographic factors, workplace worries, and coping strategies among frontline HCWs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic.		among healthcare workers. Active coping and acceptance were associated with better outcomes, while no coping strategy was linked to anxiety.
Abas et al. (2021)	To compare the mental health status and coping strategies, between gender and phase of the clinical study related to their quarantine status between 18th March 2020 to 9th June 2020 among medical students in Universiti Putra Malaysia.	173	Non-quarantined students demonstrated higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress compared to quarantined students, although coping strategy comparisons remained inconclusive.
Mohamed et al. (2021)	To assess peri-traumatic distress, resilience, and coping strategies among medical students during COVID-19 lockdown.	454	Approximately 27% of students experienced peri-traumatic distress during the lockdown, with low resilience and dysfunctional coping linked to higher psychological vulnerability.
Adnan et al. (2023)	To determine the prevalence of peri-traumatic distress symptoms and its association with the level of resilience and the coping strategies used during the lockdown among medical students.	401	The anxiety prevalence among stable COVID-19 patients was 7.0%, with significant predictors including female gender, fear of infection, lack of information, behavioral disengagement, and self-blame.
Tee et al. (2022)	To determine the prevalence of anxiety and burnout, and the coping mechanisms among clinical year undergraduate medical students in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.	378	Avoidant coping was moderately associated with anxiety and burnout among clinical-year students, with female students showing higher distress levels.
Othman et al. (2023)	To measure the level of psychological distress among caretakers of transfusion-dependent thalassemia patients and identify coping strategies used by them, as well as	68	Caretakers who employed religious coping, acceptance, and positive reframing experienced lower psychological distress, although some instances of substance use and denial were reported.

	examine factors related to both outcome measures.		
Teh et al. (2023)	To examine the association between sociodemographic factors, psychological factors, coping strategies and anxiety among medical students, as well as identifying the predictors of anxiety among them.	371	Anxiety was prevalent among 37% of students, with dysfunctional coping acting as a risk factor and self-liking serving as a protective variable.
Kulip et al. (2022)	To assess the prevalence of depression and anxiety among oil and gas workers and subsequently examine the role of sociodemographic and occupational variables, various coping styles, and emotional distress in contributing to fear of COVID-19.	299	Dysfunctional coping was the strongest predictor of COVID-19-related fear, while problem- and emotion-oriented coping also showed significant contributions.
Wahab et al. (2021)	To understand the relationship between psychosocial factors such as social support, coping, and depression among patients receiving MMT in a Malaysian Hospital.	196	Depression affected 13.8% of MMT patients, with adaptive coping and perceived social support reducing its likelihood, whereas dysfunctional coping elevated it.
Ooi et al. (2021)	To explore the relationship between religious orientation, coping strategies and suicidal behavior among secondary school adolescents and college students.	173	Adolescents were more likely than college students to exhibit suicidal behavior, with avoidant coping significantly predicting this outcome; religious orientation showed no predictive value.
Roslan et al. (2021)	To investigate the prevalence and relationship between various training characteristics, personal variables, resilience, and coping with burnout among junior doctors across multiple centers in Malaysia.	754	Burnout was prevalent among junior doctors, with avoidant coping mechanisms exacerbating the condition; individuals with irregular spiritual practices and low resilience were particularly vulnerable.

Source: Authors

Problem-focused coping, which includes planning, active coping, and seeking instrumental support, was frequently employed across clinical and educational settings and was generally associated with positive psychological outcomes. Among medical interns, problem-focused strategies were reported as the most common and were linked to reduced psychological distress (Ismail et al., 2020). Psychiatric healthcare workers also relied primarily on approach-oriented coping, which showed significant correlations with lower levels of anxiety and depression (Kumar et al., 2022). Caregivers of individuals with schizophrenia (Kamarulbahri et al., 2022) and transfusion-dependent thalassemia (Othman et al., 2023) engaged in both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, which contributed to psychological resilience. Juhari et al. (2022) found that problem-focused coping among LGBT+ individuals served as a protective factor, reducing the likelihood of mental disorders. In a randomized controlled trial, adolescents living in orphanages who received life skills education demonstrated increased use of problem- and emotion-focused strategies and a significant reduction in maladaptive responses such as denial, self-blame, and substance use (Mohammadzadeh, 2019).

Emotion-focused coping, such as acceptance, emotional support, religious coping, and positive reinterpretation, was reported across almost all included studies, but its effectiveness varied by context. Religious coping and positive reframing were associated with increased well-being and psychosocial functioning among older adults with cognitive frailty (Murukesu et al., 2021) and caregivers (Othman et al., 2022). However, among medical students, emotion-focused strategies yielded mixed outcomes. While some students benefited from emotional support and acceptance, others displayed higher levels of anxiety and distress, particularly when strategies like venting and self-blame were prominent (Masiran et al., 2018; Mohamed et al., 2021; Teh et al., 2023). Similarly, students experiencing quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated varying degrees of emotion-focused coping, with inconclusive associations to mental health outcomes (Abas et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the impact of emotion-focused coping is strongly influenced by individual resilience and situational stressors.

Avoidance coping, including denial, behavioral disengagement, self-distraction, and substance use, was the most consistently linked to negative psychological outcomes. Medical students and junior doctors who relied on avoidant strategies were more likely to experience anxiety, burnout, and psychological distress (Tee et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2021). Among methadone maintenance therapy (MMT) patients, Wahab et al. (2021) reported that dysfunctional coping strategies such as self-blame and substance use were associated with higher rates of depression. In a study of oil and gas workers, avoidant and emotion-oriented coping strategies were significant predictors of COVID-19-related fear (Kulip et al., 2022). Ooi et al. (2021) found that adolescents were more likely than college students to use avoidant strategies, which significantly increased the risk of suicidal behavior. In most cases, the use of avoidant coping appeared to exacerbate existing mental health symptoms, particularly in populations under chronic stress or without access to adequate psychosocial support.

Across the 20 studies, the synthesis revealed a clear pattern, that is, problem-focused coping was generally adaptive and protective, emotion-focused coping showed context-dependent effects, and avoidance coping was consistently maladaptive. These themes were further

shaped by the population group, type of stressor, and availability of social or institutional support.

Subgroup Synthesis
A comparison across the different population groups revealed distinct patterns in coping strategies and their psychological impacts, shaped by contextual stressors, roles, and demographic vulnerabilities.

Medical and university students (n = 8 studies) were the most frequently studied group. Across these studies, students reported high levels of psychological distress, with anxiety being the most common concern (Teh et al., 2023; Tee et al., 2022; Masiran et al., 2018). Problem-focused coping strategies such as planning and active coping were reported, particularly among clinical-year students (Tee et al., 2022), though these were often used alongside avoidant strategies like self-distraction and behavioural disengagement (Mohamed et al., 2021; Abas et al., 2021). Emotion-focused strategies like self-blame and venting were also frequently observed (Masiran et al., 2018), and these were generally linked to higher distress levels. Students who used religious or positive reframing strategies showed mixed outcomes, suggesting that emotional coping alone may not be protective in high-pressure academic environments.

Two studies examined healthcare workers (Ismail et al., 2023; Kumar et al., 2022), particularly those on the frontlines during the COVID-19 pandemic, exhibited high levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Both studies reported frequent use of problem-focused and adaptive coping strategies, including active coping, humour, and acceptance. Notably, active coping and acceptance were linked to reduced depressive symptoms, while dysfunctional coping such as self-blame and denial were associated with poorer mental health. These findings suggest that healthcare workers may benefit from structured psychological interventions that reinforce adaptive coping mechanisms, particularly during times of crisis.

Caregivers (n = 2 studies) of individuals with chronic illnesses, such as schizophrenia and thalassemia, primarily used emotion-focused coping strategies, including religious coping and acceptance (Kamarulbahri et al., 2022; Othman et al., 2022). These strategies were generally associated with better psychological well-being and lower distress levels. However, the burden of caregiving also led to occasional reliance on avoidant coping, especially when support systems were limited. Caregivers demonstrated a unique profile in which culturally embedded coping styles, such as religiosity, played a prominent role in stress regulation.

Marginalized and vulnerable groups, such as LGBT+ individuals, adolescents in orphanages, and methadone maintenance patients, demonstrated significantly different coping profiles. The LGBT+ sample demonstrated high prevalence of mental disorders, with emotion-focused coping associated with increased risk, while problem-focused coping appeared protective (Juhari et al., 2022). Adolescents in institutional care improved coping significantly following structured life skills intervention, with a reduction in avoidant and maladaptive strategies (Mohammadzadeh, 2019). Among methadone patients, dysfunctional coping such as substance use and self-blame was linked to higher depression risk (Wahab et al., 2021), highlighting the vulnerability of populations with intersecting psychological and social burdens.

Finally, working adults in high-stress industries, such as oil and gas workers, also displayed reliance on dysfunctional and emotion-oriented coping strategies during the pandemic (Kulip et al., 2022). These strategies were found to significantly predict fear and emotional distress, suggesting a need for workplace-level mental health interventions tailored to occupational risks.

Discussion

This review synthesized coping strategies and psychological outcomes across 20 studies involving diverse Malaysian populations. The findings support the broader literature on coping theory while revealing population-specific differences in the effectiveness of problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant strategies.

Problem-focused coping consistently emerged as an adaptive strategy across groups, especially among healthcare professionals and caregivers. In work environments where stressors are more controllable, individuals who employed active coping and planning reported lower levels of depression, anxiety, and burnout (Ismail et al., 2020; Kumar et al., 2022; Kamarulbahri et al., 2022). This supports the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987), which emphasizes that effective coping depends on a person's appraisal of the stressor and their perceived resources to manage it. Interventions that strengthen problem-solving and time management skills may be particularly beneficial for occupational groups.

In contrast, emotion-focused coping produced mixed results. Among medical students and university populations, strategies like emotional support, acceptance, and religious coping were sometimes associated with lower stress (Teh et al., 2023; Othman et al., 2022). However, they were also correlated with increased anxiety when maladaptive variants such as self-blame and venting were dominant (Masiran et al., 2018; Mohamed et al., 2021). This reinforces distinctions made in the dual-process model of coping, which separates adaptive emotion-focused strategies (e.g., positive reframing) from maladaptive ones (e.g., rumination or wishful thinking) (Stanisławski, 2019).

The effects of avoidant coping were consistently detrimental across all populations. Strategies such as denial, self-distraction, and behavioral disengagement were associated with higher levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Wahab et al., 2021; Ooi et al., 2021; Roslan et al., 2021). These findings align with prior research emphasizing that avoidance may intensify psychological distress by delaying resolution and increasing long-term exposure to stressors (Hofmann & Hay, 2018).

Subgroup synthesis further highlighted meaningful differences. Students showed a tendency to use both adaptive and maladaptive strategies, whereas healthcare workers more frequently relied on problem-focused coping. Caregivers, particularly older adults and those with religious backgrounds, benefited from culturally embedded coping approaches such as spiritual reframing. Marginalized groups, including LGBT+ individuals and methadone patients, showed greater reliance on emotion-focused and avoidant strategies, which were linked to poorer psychological outcomes (Juhari et al., 2022; Wahab et al., 2021).

Finally, nearly half of the studies were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely shaped the stressors, coping responses, and psychological outcomes reported. In these studies, problem-focused and adaptive emotion-focused strategies (e.g., humor, acceptance) were generally protective, while avoidant coping intensified distress, particularly in the face of uncontrollable circumstances such as quarantine or frontline work demands (Yew et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Adnan et al., 2023).

These findings have several practical implications. For healthcare workers, structured training on proactive coping may reduce burnout. For students, mental health support services should focus on strengthening resilience and reframing strategies while reducing reliance on self-blame and venting. Public health campaigns can also address the risks of avoidant coping and promote more effective alternatives such as social support-seeking and structured problem-solving.

Conclusions

This systematic review examined coping strategies assessed using the BRIEF-COPE and their relationship to psychological well-being across 20 studies involving Malaysian populations. The findings highlight consistent associations between coping types and mental health outcomes, while also revealing population-specific differences shaped by stressor context, cultural influences, and demographic characteristics.

Problem-focused coping emerged as the most consistently adaptive strategy, particularly among healthcare professionals and caregivers, where structured environments allowed individuals to actively manage stressors. Emotion-focused coping showed mixed effects; adaptive forms such as acceptance and positive reframing were beneficial in some student and caregiver groups, while maladaptive forms such as self-blame and venting were linked to increased distress. Avoidant coping, including denial, disengagement, and substance use, was consistently associated with poorer psychological outcomes across all populations.

These findings underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions that recognize the complexity of coping processes in culturally diverse settings. Interventions should aim to enhance problem-solving and resilience skills, reduce reliance on avoidant strategies, and incorporate culturally relevant coping approaches, such as religious or community-based support. This review contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting culturally informed mental health practices in Malaysia and offers practical guidance for developing population-specific stress management programs.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

While this review provides meaningful insights into coping strategies and psychological well-being in Malaysia, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, most of the included studies relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to recall or social desirability bias (Ismail et al., 2023). Second, the predominance of cross-sectional study designs limits the ability to infer causal relationships between coping mechanisms and psychological outcomes. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand the long-term effects of various coping strategies on mental health.

Third, although the BRIEF-COPE is widely used and psychometrically sound, it was developed in a Western context and may not fully capture culturally nuanced coping behaviors specific to Malaysian populations. This raises concerns about construct validity when interpreting findings across different ethnic or religious groups.

Finally, the populations represented in the reviewed studies were somewhat limited, with an overrepresentation of healthcare workers, university students, and urban adults. This constrains the generalizability of the findings to other key groups, such as older adults, individuals in rural settings, or those with lower socioeconomic status.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal designs to track coping patterns and their psychological impacts over time. More inclusive sampling strategies are also needed to explore coping strategies among marginalized and underrepresented populations, including older adults, rural communities, and minority groups. In addition, further investigation into how cultural and religious beliefs influence the effectiveness of specific coping strategies in the Malaysian context would enrich the current understanding. Lastly, exploring gender-based differences in coping and their differential psychological outcomes remains an important area for future inquiry.

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