

Chapter 4

Stress, Coping and Young Adulthood

“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.”

*Nelson Mandela (1918 -)
‘The Long Walk to Freedom’*

The previous chapter emphasised the value of the salutogenic approach to stress and coping. In this chapter, stress and coping across the lifespan will be investigated. It has been argued that stress and coping have been the most widely researched areas in psychology over the last decade (Hobfoll, Schwarzer & Chon, 1998). However, some researchers have questioned the extent to which real progress in the field has actually been made, and this debate is documented in the 2000 edition, volume 55, of *American Psychologist* (Coyne & Racioppo, 2000; Lewis & Frydenberg, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Somerfield & McCrae, 2000). Even Lazarus (2000), one of the pioneering and most widely quoted researchers on coping, has engaged in the debate around whether or not adequate progress has been made in terms of theories of stress and coping. More research on stress and coping is required (Lazarus, 2000), and this is true particularly for adolescents and young adults who face many stressors associated with major life transitions (Santrock, 2003).

The opportunity to attend college or university is construed as a positive event which enables adolescents and young adults the possibility of developing themselves as they enter a new social environment with new demands in what is generally considered a difficult and critical developmental stage in their lives (Heiman, 2004). Socially, it is

an entirely new environment and these young people need to learn to cope with adjusting to new social norms and they also need to learn to establish new social relationships (Tao, Dong, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2000). This life event is not without stress, social and academic challenges, and other significant changes.

The focus of this chapter is on deconstructing various definitions of stress and coping, as well as on the literature concerning stress and coping in late adolescence and young adulthood. Firstly, the dimensions of the *stress* and *coping* constructs will be explored. Following that, stress and coping will be investigated in terms of age and the relevance of the constructs across the life span. This chapter will also attempt to answer the question of why it is important to study wellness.

The constructs of stress and coping will now be dealt with in more detail.

4.1 Stress and Coping



A pioneer in the field of stress, Lazarus (1966, p17) defines stress as “a stimulus condition that results in a form of disequilibrium in the system, producing a kind of strain and changes in the system. Psychological stress is a threat, the anticipation of a future confrontation with harm, based on cues which are appraised by cognitive processes”. Stress is classified as multidimensional and dynamic and may result in negative consequences, but the consequences of stress may also be neutral or in fact positive (Viviers, 1998). Furthermore, stress is only defined as such if an individual perceives an event or situation as a threat and it is thus possible to refer to stress as a psychological state (Schlebusch, 2000).

Three important aspects to consider when focusing on stress in this particular study are the various dimensions of stress, Frankl's (1992) theory of noö-dynamics and the contemporary stress research and literature.

There are varying dimensions of stress and these dimensions will now be discussed.

4.1.1. Dimensions of Stress

Antonovsky (1987) warns against the assumption that all stressors are inherently bad. He claims that when an individual is faced with demands to which there are no available or automatic adaptive responses – which can be seen as stressors – there is a theoretical basis to predict positive health consequences (Antonovsky, 1987). Selye (1976) also acknowledges the functional nature of stress in terms of its ability to mobilize the organism, but the stressor is always seen to be unwanted and unfortunate even if damage can be prevented. The salutogenic approach differs from traditional theories of stress and coping in that it emphasizes the fact that stress itself may not always be fundamentally detrimental (Antonovsky, 1979).

Similarly, many people equate stress with major life problems, but it is important to acknowledge that many of the difficulties that individuals are faced with are not unusual or rare, but rather are continuous difficulties faced by the majority in society (Strümpfer, 1990). Fried (1980) categorises stress on three levels. Firstly, there is catastrophic stress which refers to major disasters which affect entire areas and/or populations; secondly acute stress resulting from crises or stressors that affect individuals or populations and which require an immediate response; and thirdly endemic stress which refers to continuous change and ongoing demands, threats or

deprivations prevalent in daily life. Endemic stress can originate in many ways, including from political, economic, social, physical, environmental, psychological and physiological events or conditions, and these stressors can accumulate and result in prolonged stress and altered social behaviour (Strümpfer, 1990). Even people who live in sheltered and privileged environments are exposed to continuous change and daily stressors, such as accidents.

It is not only the victims of physical trauma who experience stress but also their loved ones. Antonovsky (1987) states that the loved ones of those who are exposed to physical trauma or loss will also experience psychosocial stress. Furthermore, impoverished groups and people in concentration camps for example, experience extreme stressors of a different kind (Antonovsky, 1987). In South Africa, previously disadvantaged individuals living in squatter camps under very difficult conditions are also exposed to these daily stressors. Thus Antonovsky (1979, p.10) states that “stressors are omnipresent in human existence”.

Antonovsky (1993) argues that stress should not be construed as necessarily bad, but says that one should rather embrace the idea that stressors may in fact have salutary consequences and this depends on how people respond to stressors. Stressors result in tension in individuals, but if this tension is handled well, the stressor may remain neutral or in fact become health-enhancing.

Similarly, Frankl (1992) argues for the view that stressors, and here he refers specifically to suffering and difficult life circumstances, may actually result in

meaningful consequences if one handles these stressors in the appropriate manner and with the correct attitude.

4.1.2. Frankl and Noö-Dynamics

Frankl (1992) recalls a time when he was imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp, and the manuscript for a book he had just completed was taken from him. He claims that the reason he survived the difficult times there was because he was focused on reconstructing his manuscript; his focus was on something of value. Thus he argues that mental health requires a certain amount of tension between what has already been accomplished by a person and what they still hope to accomplish in the future. He says that this type of tension is inherent in human beings and necessary for mental well-being; for this reason, people should be challenged as to what potential meanings they ought to be fulfilling. The huge danger, argues Frankl (1992), is in assuming that humans need to be in a state of equilibrium or homeostasis, when what they actually need is not this tension-free state but rather noö-dynamics. Noö-dynamics refers to “the spiritual dynamics in a polar field of tension where one pole is represented by a meaning to be fulfilled and the other by the man who must fulfil it” (Frankl, 1992, p.107).

Frankl (1992) argues that difficult life circumstances are a possibility for everyone, or perhaps even an inevitability because sooner or later, people face adversity and stress. He says that having a positive attitude and viewing stress as a challenge to uncover meaning is the best way to handle stressors.

Other theorists propose different views on stress, and these perspectives will now be discussed.

4.1.3. Coping With Stress

Coping is defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as being able to constantly adapt cognitive and behavioural capacities to manage external and internal demands. They argue that coping strategies can be differentiated into three categories, namely task-oriented coping including strategies aimed at altering and managing events, emotion-oriented coping which seeks to modify emotional reactions to stress, and avoidance coping such as avoiding situations, denying stress, loss of hope, distancing oneself and avoiding the problem (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused/task-oriented coping is utilised when a situation is appraised as changeable, while emotion-focused coping is utilised when a situation seems difficult to change (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). While task-oriented coping and emotion-oriented coping are proactive coping strategies, avoidance strategy is the absence of any attempts to alter the problem situation (Causey & Dubow, 1993). The former two coping strategies have been associated with better adjustment than avoidance strategy which is associated with poorer adjustment (Compas, Malcarne & Fondacaro, 1988).

The type of coping strategy chosen is partially dependant on how an individual appraises the possibility for change in a particular situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and in turn the impact of an event on an individual is largely determined by the type of coping strategy utilised by that individual (Endler & Parker, 1990). Some researchers argue that neither emotion-focused coping, problem-focused coping or

avoidance coping are more effective than another (Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Each type of strategy has potentially positive or negative outcomes, depending on the situation.

The main aspect of Antonovsky's (1987) theory of salutogenesis is that a strong sense of coherence is essential in order to cope with stressors and also to maintain health. Antonovsky (1987) claims that sense of coherence is more or less stable already in early adolescence and that full stability of this construct is attained at approximately age 30 (see section 3.2.3). After this age, only very dramatic events should influence sense of coherence – even psychotherapy should not be enough to alter the construct (Geyer, 1997).

Coping is often delineated into only two categories, namely problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Snyder, 2001). According to the life span theory of control, people use fewer problem-focused coping strategies as they age, presumably because certain things become impossible to control, such as death of a spouse for example (Snyder, 2001). Thus coping skills or strategies change dynamically to meet varying and changing demands over the life span. However, some aspects of coping seem to remain stable throughout life and are unique to particular individuals regardless of age or stressor and can be considered a stable internal personality trait (Snyder, 2001). As people age, encouraging and maintaining activities that are meaningful or have personal value promote physical and psychological well-being. Certain factors have been identified in research as enhancing the coping process, including obtaining social support, using humour, comparing one's attributes with others to improve subjective well-being, revealing secrets, being active and finding meaning (Snyder, 2001). The present study focuses on the latter. Finding meaning is

an important factor in an individual's adjustment to negative life events. By ascribing meaning to stressful events, people act on their experiences by means of approach coping. In this way, finding meaning is directed at the self and thus, in order to cope effectively, it is important to gain a sense of mastery over stressful events which would otherwise seem uncontrollable and overwhelming.

Non-coping refers to an individual's inability to manage internal and external difficulties, thus resulting in further stress (Cilliers et al., 1998). Looking to South African research, Cilliers et al. (1998, p. 37) document a profile of individuals coping or not coping with change, and this profile is presented in Figure 4.1.

Category	Copers' response to change	Non-copers' response to change
Cognitive	View change as challenge View change as opportunity Look on the bright side Positive reappraisal of own abilities	View change as a threat View change as a problem View self as out of control Tunnel vision View self as powerless Negative reappraisal of own abilities
Emotional	Emotional self-control Affect regulation Resigned acceptance Controlled emotional discharge	Negatively experiences emotions of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - confusion - insecurity - anger - depression
Conative	View the self as in control	Respond with:

	Dealing with realities Seeking information Seeking social support Accepting responsibility Commitment Self-control Productive in work environment Maintain quantity and quality of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - emotional outbursts - disputes - substance abuse - false front - withdrawal behaviour - demonstrative action - overt and covert sabotage - secret operations - sleeplessness - no joy or laughter - reduced sexual desire - preoccupation with own problems - lack of sympathy - deteriorating relationships - arguments/ conflict - absenteeism - accident prone - non-focused action - lack of priorities
--	--	---

Figure 4.1 Comparative Profile of Copers and Non-Copers

The following section will focus on contemporary theories of coping and, thereafter, the relationship between the constructs of Antonovsky's (1987) sense of coherence and coping will be explored. Also a cross-cultural perspective of coping will be explored.

The constructs of stress and coping will now be investigated in further detail by focusing on contemporary literature on stress and coping.

4.1.4. Contemporary Theories of Stress and Coping

Tertiary institution students experience academic life as stressful (Wan, 1992). One source of stress for students includes both external pressures of academic life and internal expectations of the self in this new environment, and these stressors are then said to result in emotional reactions (Misra & McKean, 2000). Lazarus (1993) argues that people appraise events as either a threat or a challenge, and coping is seen as the way threats are dealt with by individuals. He claims that psychological distress refers to a subset of emotions. When people experience the arousal of unpleasant negative strong emotions such as fear, anxiety or anger, they seek emotional or cognitive ways to decide on “fight or flight” (Monat & Lazarus, 1991).

The relationship between stress and coping seems to be somewhat reciprocal, in that not only must individuals find ways to cope with stress, but coping results in the ability to manage and minimize stress (Cilliers et al., 1998).



Coping research dates back all the way to the defense mechanisms ideas of Freud (1953-1974), and the subject of coping has gained renewed interest over the last couple of decades, as individuals face more and more stressors associated with the frenzied pace of modern living (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004). However, not much research has been conducted on what constitutes good coping or poor coping (Amirkhan, 1990; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004). It has been argued that inadequate coping resources may result in poor psychosocial outcomes such as poor academic performance, conduct problems, anxiety, depression, suicide, eating disorders and violence (Kovacs, 1997; Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004; Puskar, Hoover & Miewald, 1992; Richaud de Minzi, 2003).

One study by the authors of the Adolescent Coping Scale, Erica Frydenberg and Ramon Lewis (1996) which investigated the level of concern about a number of social issues and coping strategies used to address them, found that in a sample of Australian adolescents (N=397), a number of coping strategies were utilised. The top four coping strategies used were seeking relaxing diversions, working hard to achieve, physical recreation, and solving the problem. The strategies employed the least referred mostly to non-productive coping strategies such as engaging in social action, worry and self-blame. The social issues were pollution, discrimination, global war and community violence. The researchers found that at least a third of the students in the sample showed concern for all four social issues presented. However there was a high average level of concern across the areas, and no items were rated *low* concern, and thus responses may have been influenced by social desirability. These results imply that adolescents may be less concerned with broader social issues and that they may in fact be more concerned with their own social issues. Future research is necessary in order to ascertain how adolescents cope with their own personal stress.

Edwards and Holden (2003) investigated life meaning and coping strategies as statistical predictors of suicidal manifestations in university students (N=147). Participants completed a number of measures, including questionnaires for hopelessness, sense of coherence, purpose in life, coping for stressful situations, suicide ideation, prior suicide attempts, and self-reported likelihood for committing suicide in the future. Utilising multiple regression techniques, life meaning and coping were used to predict suicide. Partial support was found for the hypothesis that meaning in life is a buffer between coping style and suicidal manifestations (Edwards

& Holden, 2003). This study examined men and women separately, but it does not explain the gender differences in this study. Furthermore, this study attempts to identify clinical behaviour, yet these were non-psychiatric patients. The researchers recommend that further research should focus on the relationships among current life stressors, meaning in life and coping (Edwards & Holden, 2003).

Research from the 1980's suggests that young people have to deal with general pessimism and despair in the face of potential world disaster, and they feel unable to cope (Beardslee & Mack, 1986; Schacter, 1986). Some contemporary studies suggest however, that young people are far more optimistic about the world (Porter, 1993). This is not necessarily applicable to South African youth. For example, Porter (1993) used Australian participants, and furthermore, studied their views on Australia specifically. With the high crime and unemployment rates in South Africa, it is entirely possible that young people do not feel so optimistic.



In a study that does in fact address the question of what constitutes good coping and poor coping, Frydenberg and Lewis (2004) recently investigated the coping strategies utilised by weak copers in young people (N=976) using the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). They examined which coping strategies were utilised more by poor copers in order to help poorer copers develop more adequate coping skills. Frydenberg and Lewis (2004) acknowledge the contribution of Lazarus and his colleagues (Lazarus, 1991; 1993; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; 1988) to the field of coping research, but argue that problem-focused and emotion-focused coping framework utilised by Lazarus et al (1985; 1993) is too narrow to explain good and poor coping. For example, emotion-focused coping strategies may be good or poor.

Recent research indicates that emotions may have an adaptive nature, and this is in contrast to previous understandings of transactional theory, which emphasises the negative aspects of emotion-focused coping (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004). As a result of these findings, Frydenberg and Lewis (2004) delineate the coping strategies on the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) into three categories, namely problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping and non-productive coping. The study by Frydenberg and Lewis (2004) on adolescents who are least able to cope indicates that even poor copers utilise productive coping strategies at times. However, for these young people, the use of non-productive strategies may be outweighing the more productive strategies. This study utilised only the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993) and no attempt was made to ascertain why individuals were poor or good copers. Clearly it is important to ascertain why some people cope well while others are unable to cope.

In a cross-cultural study, Frydenberg, Lewis and their colleagues (2003) focused on a comparison between Australian, Colombian, German and Palestinian adolescents using the Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993). This research indicated the importance of identifying coping strategies that are relevant for particular communities. For example, 'physical recreation' as a coping strategy was ranked second for German young people, but it was ranked in 16th place for Palestinian youth, indicating the importance of understanding culturally determined activities and the links between these activities and coping behaviours (Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte & Hannoun, 2003). However, many studies indicate that there are more similarities than differences in terms of young peoples' coping across communities (Seiffge-Krenke & Shulman, 1990; Seiffge-Krenke, 1992;

Schonpflug & Jansen, 1995; Jose, D'Anna, Cafasso, Bryant, Chiker, Gein & Zhezmer, 1998). Even so, researchers caution against simply applying coping programs from one community to the other without first gaining an understanding of the community in question; one should not assume that coping will necessarily be the same in different student populations (Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte & Hannoun, 2003).

Research is needed on stress and coping in adolescents and young adults in the South African context. Coping with stress in adolescence and young adulthood is an important topic because of the age-specific stressors associated with this dynamic life stage. The following section investigates stress and coping in the different life stages of individuals, specifically late adolescence/young adulthood, which is the important age range for this study.

4.2 Stress and Coping across the Life Span

Individuals are required to cope with various types of stressors across the life span, and this section examines theories of stress and coping in infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

The first topic for discussion in this section relates to the various theories of life stages.

4.2.1. Theories of Life Stages

Various theories offer different explanations of how individuals develop and mature over time, both personally and in other contexts. Three developmental theories that

are of particular interest for young people, especially those in late adolescence and early adulthood, are the theories put forward by Daniel Levinson (1978), Erik Erikson (1982) and Donald Super (1980).

The first developmental theory is that of Levinson (1978) which attempts to explain the change process that occurs and re-occurs consistently in individuals' lives.

4.2.1.1. Levinson's Theory of Development

Levinson (1978) refers to what he calls the evolution of the individual life structure and sees adult life as a continuous process of building and changing life structures characterized by periods of transition and reconstruction. Levinson's (1978) focus is on the normal adult life cycle, which is punctuated by *marker events* for individuals, which may be linked to cultural norms. Such events include marriage, birth of a baby, moving home, moving job or career, children leaving home, death of a parent and other events which can be said to be events which happen *on time*. One must also take into account "psychosocial transitions" which are major life changes that have lasting effects, such as job loss, sudden disability, and loss of a loved one. Levinson's model associates developmental periods with chronological age. The first developmental period is known as *early adult transition* and occurs in individuals aged 17 to 22. In this period individuals are becoming more financially and psychologically independent, and they are beginning to explore the world and make important life decisions without the assistance of their parents (Levinson, 1978). The second developmental stage occurs between the ages of 22 and 28 and is known as *entering the adult world*. The *age 30 transition* stage is between ages 28 and 33, *settling down* between ages 33 and 40 and *the midlife transition* characterizes 40 to 45

year olds. At ages 45 to 50 individuals are said to be *entering middle adulthood*. The *age 50 transition* is between 50 and 55 and the *culmination of middle adulthood* between ages 55 and 60. *Late adult transition* occurs between the ages of 60 and 65 and people aged 65 or older are said to be in *late adulthood*.

Levinson's (1978) developmental periods are characterized by alternating times of calm and transition, which is contrasted with Erikson's (1982) developmental theory.

4.2.1.2. Erikson's Developmental Model

Erikson (1982) proposed eight psychosexual stages of development, each characterised by a developmental task in the form of a crisis that needs to be resolved. The first stage occurs in the first year of infancy and is known as the *trust versus mistrust* stage. In this stage, an infant needs to feel physically comforted, and must learn to expect that the world is pleasant and safe (Santrock, 2003). The second stage is *autonomy versus shame and doubt* occurring between one and three years of age, and in this stage, individuals assert their own independence and will. If punished harshly, they will develop shame and doubt. The third stage is *initiative versus guilt* and occurs in ages three to five. In this stage, children must develop a sense of responsibility and initiative. The *industry versus inferiority* stage is marked by learning and acquiring knowledge, and occurs in individuals from 6 years old until puberty. There is a possibility that some individuals may feel unproductive, incompetent and inferior, and children in this stage thus need much encouragement (Erikson, 1982). The fifth stage is *identity versus identity confusion*, and this stage occurs during adolescence, which is approximately between 10 to 20 years. In this phase, individuals must discover who they are and find direction for their lives, as

they explore different roles. Exploring many roles and having the space to do this without having ideas forced on them will enable these individuals to develop an identity. In the early adulthood stage of the 20s and 30s known as *intimacy versus isolation*, the task is for individuals to form close intimate relationships and friendships. In this stage, individuals forge relationships on their own outside of the parental relationship. In addition, people in this stage continue to explore different life roles. In middle adulthood, individuals face *generativity versus stagnation*, where they need to assist the younger generation to learn and grow. In the final stage of *integrity versus despair*, Erikson (1982) argues that individuals retrospectively evaluate their lives.

Unlike Erikson's (1982) theory, Super's (1980) developmental approach is linked to career development.

4.2.1.3. Super's Approach to Development

Another theory pertaining to young adult development is Donald Super's (1980) theory which is referred to as a lifespan life-space theory of career development. He views career development as a lifelong process. Super (1980) argues that the change process occurs over a series of life stages which occur in a sequence, and these stages are further divided in terms of developmental tasks. The life stages are *growth* which occurs in childhood between 4 and 13 years, *exploration* which occurs in adolescence between the ages of 14 and 24, *establishment*, the early adulthood phase which occurs between the ages of 25 and 44, *maintenance* which is the middle adulthood phase consisting of individuals between the ages of 45 and 64 years, and *disengagement* which centres around late adulthood of people who are 65 and older (Super, Savickas

& Super, 1996). These stages may re-occur a number of times, depending on personal, social or career-related changes (Langley, 1999). In order to cope successfully with environmental demands at a particular life stage, an individual must be ready to cope with these challenges in terms of his/her level of career maturity. Career maturity is a psychosocial construct that indicates how developed an individual is on the continuum of life stages. Furthermore, for these life stages to occur, an individual must develop adequate abilities, interests and coping resources, and also establish ways of reality testing and forming a self-concept (Langley, 1999).

Adolescence or young adulthood is a phase of particular interest during the career maturity stage, preceding the career adaptability stage of adulthood. Super's (1980) ideas regarding the lifespan life-space approach to development is an appropriate theory for this particular study in that the *exploration* phase of his theory is applicable to adolescents and young adults who form the target age group for this study. The *exploration* stage of an individual's life occurs during the period known as *adolescence* which includes young people in the 14 – 24 years age group (Super, Savickas & Super, 1996). These individuals are said to be exploring their options in terms of careers, and they are learning to integrate various aspects of their self-concepts. Their aim at this stage is to verify their career choice to formalise career maturity. In terms of adaptability, these individuals are focussing on their own needs and identity and their values centre around a physical, social and autonomous lifestyle. This age group enjoys life roles that include leisure activities and learning new skills, and they are prone to daydreaming (Langley, 1999). They focus on their peers as well as on other role models within their own particular cultural context.

Clearly, this stage of life is characterised by much change, and successful exploration requires that these young people must be able to cope with demands and successfully complete this stage. Research is needed in order to ascertain how these variables apply to young people in the South African population.

While this section discussed the theories of life stages of various theorists, the following section will focus specifically on sense of coherence in infancy and childhood.

4.2.2. Sense of Coherence in Infancy and Childhood

Bowlby's (1971) attachment theory proposes that after birth infants are able to interact with caregivers in ways which promote caring, proximity and intimacy. Infants are able to promote stable and consistent responses soon after birth (Antonovsky, 1987). Erikson (1982) however notes that this is what is expected of infants but not all infants necessarily react this way. He claims that there may be a succession of potentialities characterized by times of both crisis and challenge. If an infant's mother or caregiver presents him/herself as a constant object, the infant will learn that the world is familiar, unchanging and consistent and will successfully resolve the first stage of life known as *basic trust versus mistrust* and the baby begins to develop a worldview characterized by comprehensibility (Antonovsky, 1979). The caregiver's responses must be gratifying as well as consistent in order for an infant to develop a sense of meaningfulness, as the child is socialized into the family and becomes a proactive being (Antonovsky, 1987). Load balances characterized by overload may lead to a lack of manageability, for example if a child is expected to master toilet training before he/she is physiologically ready. Antonovsky (1979)

claims that a balance of responses namely being ignored, refused, channelled, encouraged or approved, can facilitate a strong sense of manageability, which can in turn result in a strong sense of coherence.

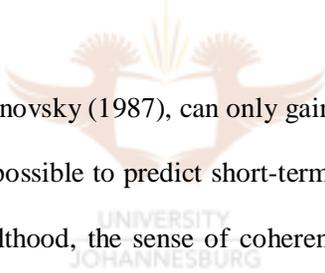
While the above factors characterise sense of coherence and coping in infants and children, it is adolescence according to Antonovsky (1987, p100) that “reverses, stabilizes, or strengthens” the direction of the sense of coherence and it is this developmental stage that will be examined next.

4.2.3. Stress and Coping Strategies of Young Adults

Antonovsky (1987) argues that young adults, in their first decade of adulthood, must face many commitments and begin to piece together cognitive issues and resolve life’s inconsistencies. Thus, each individual, depending on his/her particular pattern of life experiences, places him/herself on the sense of coherence continuum and, says Antonovsky (1987, p119), “it is unlikely ... that one’s sense of coherence, once formed and set, will change in any radical way” (see section 3.2.4).

It is only after the first decade of adulthood that individuals eventually resolve cognitive disparity and come to realize that some things in life are marked by chaos and seem unmanageable and meaningless, while other life events are positive experiences (Antonovsky, 1987). Thus, one has a very stable sense of coherence at this stage of one’s life. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Antonovsky (1987) points out that this hypothesis works best for the person with a strong sense of coherence formed in adolescence. Individuals who develop a weak or moderate sense of coherence may in fact develop even lower levels of sense of coherence over time

because these individuals may experience more generalized resistance deficits than generalized resistance resources when encountering challenging life circumstances (Antonovsky, 1987). This means that it would be very difficult, but not impossible, for someone with a weak or moderate sense of coherence in adolescence or young adulthood to develop a stronger sense of coherence over time. Every setback, task or challenge faced by weak or moderate sense of coherence individuals will not be handled as well as they would by individuals with a strong sense of coherence. Adolescents and young adults who develop a strong sense of coherence are unlikely to develop either stronger or weaker levels because they are constantly facing difficult life challenges and it is only by utilizing generalized resistance resources that they manage to maintain equilibrium.



The adolescent, claims Antonovsky (1987), can only gain a tentatively strong sense of coherence from which it is possible to predict short-term coping for stressors. In late adolescence and young adulthood, the sense of coherence of an individual is in the process of becoming fixed, and after the first decade of adulthood, one's sense of coherence is fixed and remains mostly stable over time.

Antonovsky (1987) refers to Levinson's (1978) life-cycle developmental model (described in section 4.2.1.1) to elaborate on how, despite all the literature and theories on stability and change, the SOC is stable throughout adulthood.

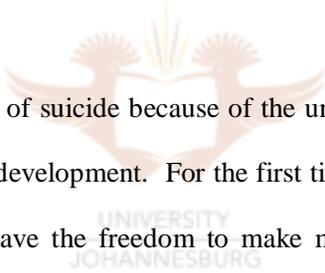
Adolescents utilize behavioural and cognitive strategies to eliminate or reduce demands and cope with or adapt to stressors. Adolescents must utilize a variety of strategies to make stressors more manageable (Price & Stuart, 2002). In early

adolescence, individuals have to face many emotional, physiological and psychological stressors and they have not yet established enough appropriate coping responses. This improves as they progress into late adolescence/young adulthood when they begin to learn a wide variety of coping responses as well as which responses are more appropriate (Compas & Epping, 1993). Individuals learn problem-solving skills during the preschool and primary school years from adult modelling behaviours, and emotion-focused coping develops in late childhood and early adolescence as individuals become more aware of emotional states and the ability to self-regulate these states (Compas & Epping, 1993).

Adolescence/young adulthood is a time in an individual's life which is typically characterized by intense turbulence, confusion, and self-doubt. Whatever basis an individual may genetically or environmentally be predisposed to, is somewhat upset in the period of adolescence, according to Antonovsky (1987). Adolescents and young adults have the task of developing a personality and way of functioning, reacting, and coping within the world and immediate social reality within which they finds themselves (Whitty, 2003). Erikson (1982) states that adolescents must master experiences in life and emerge with a sense of mastery to continue into adulthood. The cultural context plays a role in the development and maintenance of sense of coherence throughout an individual's life. In fact, social class, history, sex, genetic factors and environmental factors combine to foster a strong sense of coherence, and although these factors do not precisely determine sense of coherence, they are certainly very influential in terms of its statistical prediction (Antonovsky, 1987). During adolescence, the individual gains a tentatively strong sense of coherence, which is useful for short-range prediction of coping with stressors (Antonovsky,

1987). In young adulthood, the sense of coherence becomes a fixed and stable aspect within an individual. After the age of 30, no changes are made at all in terms of the sense of coherence construct within an individual, unless there are dramatic life changes or extreme life events or circumstances.

There is a large body of research focusing on adult-oriented coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985, 1988; Stone & Neale, 1984), while there has been some research on how to assess adolescent coping behaviour (Compas, 1987; Fanshawe & Burnett, 1991). Frydenberg and Lewis (1991a; 1991b; 1993) developed the Adolescent Coping Scale in order to reflect coping strategies in language that is relevant to the population.



Adolescents have high rates of suicide because of the unique challenges that this age group faces in this stage of development. For the first time in their lives, adolescents and young adults usually have the freedom to make many life-decisions that they could not make until now. Adolescents and young adults are also at the age where they can begin to contemplate the relevance of their decisions on their lives and on other people (Santrock, 2003).

The following section deals with the reasons why it is useful for health professionals to focus on wellness and how this shift in focus benefits adolescents and young adults as they learn to cope with stressors.

4.3 Why Focus on Wellness?

There is much scope for research to be done on how adolescents and young adults cope with stressors and how they create mental representations of stressors. Furthermore, it is relevant to try to identify whether adolescents' and young adults' mental representations of stressors are linked to the coping strategies they select (Gates & Wolverton, 2002). Many adolescents and young adults select coping strategies which are counterproductive when they are frustrated or focus on what may go wrong (Gates & Wolverton, 2002). Children and adolescents have to deal with many different forms of stressors. Between the ages of 14 and 18, psychological symptoms are experienced when adolescents have to face issues such as peer pressure and expectations. Academic stressors were the major predictor of psychological symptoms in adolescents 18 years and older who were pursuing a tertiary education (Gates & Wolverton, 2002). Most adolescents and young adults use problem-focused and emotion-focused ways of coping, whether it be for two different stressors or the same stressor where both modes of coping are utilized. Suls and Fletcher (1985) argue that while emotion-focused coping may be useful in the short-term, only problem-focused coping deals with long-term threats. Clearly, stress and coping are dynamic issues which may take on various forms throughout the life span.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter investigated the dimensions of stress by referring to Frankl's (1992) noö-dynamics and contemporary stress research. Coping was investigated in terms of the current literature on coping, the salutogenic model and coping, and a cross-cultural view on coping. This section also explored age-specific criteria including sense of

coherence in infancy and childhood as well as stress and coping in adolescents and young adults. Life stage theories were investigated in terms of the approaches of Levinson (1978), Erikson (1982) and Super (1980). Meaning in life, stress and well-being throughout the life-span was also investigated with regards to the relationship between these constructs for the purposes of this research.

While it seems inevitable that young adults will experience stress, it is valuable to investigate how stress is dealt with in terms of the coping strategies utilised, and furthermore to establish whether or not young people are in fact coping at all. Coping is the purposeful reaction to arousal, and some young adults will do this through problem-focused coping where they specifically try to solve the problem, while others employ emotion-focused coping strategies where they simply accommodate their concerns without implementing a solution (Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte & Hannoun, 2003). However, research is needed in order to establish whether or not in fact there are young adults who are not coping at all, and what the situation is in South Africa based on the concerns and difficulties specific to this country in terms of whether South African youths seem to be coping or not coping.

This research project addresses some of these issues, and the research methodology employed in this study is the focus of the next chapter.