

## FEATURES OF COPING BEHAVIOR IN STRESS SITUATIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

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*This article examines coping behavior and psychological defense mechanisms among law enforcement officers under conditions of chronic occupational stress. The relevance of the study is determined by the extreme nature of police work, continuous psychoemotional strain, high levels of professional responsibility, and the impact of socioeconomic disruptions associated with martial law. Under such conditions, the effectiveness of professional functioning largely depends on the development of adaptive coping strategies and the structure of psychological defense mechanisms.*

*The purpose of the study is to analyze the coping behavior and psychological defense of police officers from different units with different lengths of service.*

*The scientific novelty of the study lies in identifying department-specific patterns of coping behavior among law enforcement officers, taking into account professional experience, as well as in analyzing the dynamics of the balance between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies under prolonged occupational stress.*

*The findings indicate that criminal police officers are more likely to employ avoidance- and emotion-oriented coping strategies, whereas patrol police officers and personnel support staff predominantly rely on problem-focused coping. Rationalization, denial, and projection prevail in the structure of psychological defense mechanisms. With increasing length of service, the use of avoidance strategies decreases, while orientation toward constructive coping strategies increases. The results substantiate the need for differentiated psychological support programs and targeted resilience development interventions for law enforcement personnel.*

**Key words:** coping behavior, psychological defense mechanisms, stress, professional activity, law enforcement officers, length of service, adaptive coping strategies, avoidance.

### Віденєєв І. ОСОБЛИВОСТІ КОПІНГ-ПОВЕДІНКИ У СТРЕСОВИХ СИТУАЦІЯХ ПРАЦІВНИКІВ ПРАВООХОРОННИХ ОРГАНІВ

*Стаття присвячена дослідженню особливостей копінг-поведінки та механізмів психологічного захисту правоохоронців в умовах хронічного професійного стресу. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена екстремальним характером діяльності співробітників органів внутрішніх справ, постійною психоемоційною напругою, високою відповідальністю та впливом соціально-економічних потрясінь, пов'язаних із воєнним станом. Ефективність професійної діяльності в таких умовах багато в чому визначається сформованістю адаптивних стратегій подолання стресів і характером психологічних захистів, що використовуються.*

*Мета дослідження – виявити психологічні особливості копінг-поведінки та механізмів психологічного захисту працівників поліції різних підрозділів та з різним стажем професійної діяльності.*

*Методологія дослідження ґрунтувалася на принципах системного та діяльнісного підходів.*

*Наукова новизна дослідження полягає у виявленні специфіки копінг-поведінки працівників правоохоронних органів з урахуванням підрозділу та професійного стажу, а також в аналізі динаміки співвідношення адаптивних та дезадаптивних стратегій опанування стресу.*

*Встановлено, що співробітники кримінальної поліції частіше використовують стратегії уникнення та емоційного реагування, тоді як працівники патрульної поліції та кадрового забезпечення переважно орієнтовані на вирішення проблеми. У структурі психологічних захистів домінують раціоналізація, заперечення та проєкція. Зі збільшенням стажу знижується значущість стратегії уникнення та зростає орієнтація на конструктивні форми копіngu. Отримані результати доводять необхідність впровадження диференційованих програм психологічної підтримки та розвитку стресостійкості співробітників правоохоронних органів.*

**Ключові слова:** копінг-поведінка, психологічний захист, стрес, професійна діяльність, правоохоронні органи, стаж роботи, адаптивні стратегії, уникнення.

**Introduction.** Three years of war with Russia, accompanied by significant socioeconomic transformations and upheavals, have significantly increased the number of potential stressors dangerous to human psychological health. Effective functioning in such conditions largely depends on the necessary personal resources for regulating one's attitude toward rapidly changing life situations and the ability to overcome negative experiences through specific strategies of mastering behavior. The ability to adequately perceive a situation, adapt to it, and self-regulate mental states are also important components of resilience, ensuring

a state of mental homeostasis. This significantly reduces emotional tension and anxiety, thereby ensuring the rational use of mental resources and reducing the disruption of physiological and behavioral responses. Psychological research confirms that successful adaptation to new conditions involves gradual understanding of the new situation and, if possible, even a change in its conditions. The response system is also restructured in accordance with the new perception of the situation.

The study of the diverse methods and mechanisms of human adaptation to the demands of professional activity, directly related to stress, initially seemed like a natural extension of the classical postulates of Selye's stress theory into the analysis of the most important forms of human activity. At the same time, the possibilities of directly transferring the conceptual framework developed by Selye's school to the analysis of specific situations and phenomena are clearly limited by the diversity and complexity of the realities of professional life. Consequently, in applied research, the concepts of "stress" and "adaptive regulation" began to be interpreted very loosely, as mere general guidelines, which spurred the development of occupational stress research, which began in the West in the late 1960s.

This field of applied research, which is being developed very intensively today, arose at the intersection of psychology, physiology, medicine, and a number of social sciences related to labor. Today, the study of workplace stress is identified as a critical scientific issue due to its impact on performance, productivity, work quality, and health.

The theoretical foundations of stress-coping behavior are closely linked to the problem of stress. Coping and stress are two inseparable processes. Selye's concept of stress and that of his followers focused primarily on analyzing the external stressor. However, psychologists, above all, substantiated the proposition that the ability to overcome stress is, in most cases, more important than the nature, magnitude, and frequency of the stress. This became the theoretical basis for the development of the transactional cognitive theory of stress and coping behavior.

Due to the nature of their professional work, law enforcement officers work under conditions of heightened psycho-emotional stress and the negative impact of a variety of stress factors, a topic that has received considerable attention from Ukrainian researchers [1; 2; 3]. The ability to effectively cope with stressful situations determines the effectiveness of their work and reduces the likelihood of destructive professional changes. One means of overcoming difficult life situations is psychological defense mechanisms and coping behavior, which is why research into coping strategies and psychoprotective behavior among law enforcement officers is particularly important.

**Materials and methods.** A number of scientific studies by Z. Freud, L. Murphy, R. Lazarus, A. Billings, S. Volkman, S. Hobbfall [4; 5; 6] and others are devoted to the study of strategies of psychoprotective and coping behavior. However, despite the fairly significant number of studies on this problem, it is quite relevant in terms of psychological assistance to people working in stressful conditions, in particular police officers. Taking into account this feature of the professional activity of employees of the internal affairs bodies, we had the opportunity to study the level of formation psychoprotective behavior of law enforcement officers, compare these characteristics among officers of different departments, and also track the dynamics of changes in coping mechanisms among law enforcement officers with different lengths of service.

**The purpose** of this study is to determine the psychological characteristics of the psychoprotective and coping behavior of police officers from different departments and with different lengths of professional experience.

**The object** of the study is the coping behavior of the personality of employees of the internal affairs bodies.

**The subject** of the study is the psychoprotective and coping behavior of employees of internal affairs agencies.

To achieve the set goals, the following tasks had to be solved:

To identify the mechanisms of psychological defense and characteristics of coping behavior in stressful situations of employees of various departments of the internal affairs bodies.

To determine the characteristics of coping behavior of law enforcement officers depending on their length of professional experience

In the process of theoretical study of the problem and scientific research work, special empirical methods were used – psychodiagnostic research methods:

- "Lifestyle Index" (R. Plutchik) – for the diagnosis of various mechanisms of psychological defense;
- "Coping behavior in stressful situations" (S. Norman, D. Endler, D. James, M. Parker) – to study the characteristics of individual behavior in a stressful situation and to determine the dominant coping-stress behavioral strategies of law enforcement officers;
- "Coping test" (R. Lazarus) – to determine the dominant coping strategies of employees of internal affairs agencies, which are used by the individual in order to overcome the negative influence of stress factors;
- Corrective methods – conducting training to increase the level of stress resistance and create a positive "I-concept".

In order to establish cause-and-effect relationships, methods of mathematical statistics were used: Student's t-test.

Fifty-six police officers in the Kharkiv region participated in the study. Participants were divided into three groups based on the specific nature of their work.

**Results.** Coping is aimed at eliminating a psychologically threatening situation, that is, maintaining a balance between environmental demands and the resources that satisfy these conditions. The prerequisite for coping is stress—a human condition, a nonspecific reaction at the physiological, psychological, and behavioral levels that occurs in response to adverse events.

Stress management is an integral component of an organization's overall HR management system. This process involves implementing a system of measures aimed at helping individuals adapt to stressful situations, as well as preventing them. Stress management is of paramount importance to law enforcement agencies.

There is reason to believe that service in the police department requires employees to develop new, specific coping behaviors that enable them to effectively cope with stress on a daily basis, regardless of the severity of the stressor, and to respond appropriately to multiple stressful situations. In our opinion, phenomena such as suicide, personnel deaths, violations of the law, and negative manifestations of stress are directly or indirectly related to the lack of development of these coping behaviors, coping behavior among police officers, their use of maladaptive coping strategies and the “weakness” of personal-environmental coping resources.

To determine the dominant coping-stress behavioral strategies of law enforcement officers, we used the method “Coping behavior in stressful situations” (S. Norman, D.F. Endler, D.A. James, M.I. Parker).

The results of the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

**Features of coping behavior in stressful situations of employees of the internal affairs bodies of various departments ( $\bar{x} \pm \sigma$ , points)**

Type and coping behavior	CP	PD	PP	t 1–2	t 2–3	t 1–3
Orientation to solve the problem	34.2 ±24.13	54.14 ±38.21	62.52 ±45.23	2.75 *	3.59 **	0.97
Focus on emotions	53.24 ±39.71	33.02 ±25.56	37.15 ±28.71	2.65 *	2.22 *	0.52
Avoidance orientation	57.4 ±42.86	37.9 ±28.22	52.08 ±31.13	2.46 *	0.78	1.63

Note: \* –  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p \leq 0.001$ , CP – criminal police, PD – personnel department, PP – patrol police

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 1, in a stressful situation, criminal police officers are more oriented towards avoiding (57.4 ± 42.86) a problem situation by switching from the problem to another activity, such as rest or communication with friends. While employees of patrol police units are more oriented towards solving a problem situation (54.14 ± 38.21). The same coping mechanism is more characteristic of personnel support workers. Among the employees we studied, they are the most oriented towards solving a problem (62.52 ± 45.23). Criminal police officers are the most susceptible to emotions during stress (53.24 ± 39.71), while other units are more restrained in showing emotionality in a problem situation (33.02 ± 25.56 – PD, 37.15 ± 28.71 – PP).

Thus, when dealing with difficult situations, police officers in the criminal justice unit tend to focus on avoidance, suppression, and impulsive behavior. These techniques are counterproductive in that they don't solve the problem, but they are adaptive because they alleviate the psychological strain. Patrol police and human resources officers, on the other hand, are problem-solving-oriented in stressful situations, are less susceptible to emotions, and are less inclined to avoid stressful situations.

When comparing the characteristics of the use of psychoprotective behavior in groups of police officers based on their length of service in the internal affairs bodies, the following data were obtained: three groups of police officers with different lengths of service in the internal affairs bodies used the following psychological defense mechanisms: rationalization: group 1 (6.51±2.55), group 2 (6.08±2.59), group 3 (5.73±1.99); denial: group 1 (5.24±1.76), group 2 (4.56±0.94), group 3 (5.42±1.25) and projection: group 1 (4.24±0.72), group 2 (4.27±2.78).

At the statistical significance level ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), it was established that subjects in the first group (5.24±1.76) and the third group (5.42±1.25) were more likely than subjects in the second group (4.56±0.94) to experience difficult, stressful situations. This means that police officers with up to 5 years of service and 10–15 years of service in the internal affairs bodies reduce anxiety through denial by altering their perception of the external environment. They do not perceive information that contradicts their beliefs and could lead to conflict.

Table 2

**Features of psychoprotective behavior of police officers with different lengths of service in the Internal Affairs Directorate ( $\bar{x}$  <sub>average</sub>  $\pm\sigma$ , points)**

Psychological defense mechanisms	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	t 1–2	t 2–3	t 1–3
Displacement	2.14±1.26	2.83 ± 1.45	2.75±1.37	1.12	0.22	0.88
Regression	3.13±1.12	3.079±2.09	3.52±2.07	0.24	1.16	0.93
Substitution	1.47±1.08	1.19±1.14	1.51±1.82	1.03	1.28	0.42
Negation	5.24±1.76	4.56±0.94	5.42±1.25	1.89 *	2.21 *	0.64
Projection	4.24±0.72	4.27±2.78	4.46±2.93	0.38	0.65	0.71
Compensation	2.71±1.27	3.43±2.17	3.56±2.81	1.45	0.63	2.13 *
Overcompensation	2.32±1.47	2.29±1.43	1.52±1.90	0.22	0.95	1.16
Rationalization	6.51±2.55	6.08±2.59	5.73±1.99	0.93	1.23	1.34

Note: \* –  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p \leq 0.001$ , group 1 – work experience up to 5 years; group 2 – work experience 5–10 years; group 3 – work experience 10–15 years

Subjects in the third group (3.56±2.81) were statistically significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more likely to use compensation when faced with difficult situations than subjects in the first group (2.71±1.27). Thus, police officers with 10–15 years of service in the police department conceal their shortcomings by emphasizing non-existent but desirable character traits or by demonstrating a different aspect of their work. This suggests that compensation functions as a psychological defense mechanism in the professional work of law enforcement officers.

When comparing groups based on length of service in the Internal Affairs Directorate, the following data were obtained (Table 3).

Table 3

**Features of coping mechanisms of police officers with different lengths of service in the internal affairs bodies ( $\bar{x}$  <sub>average</sub>  $\pm\sigma$ , points)**

Coping mechanisms	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	t 1–2	t 2–3	t 1–3
Confrontational coping	53.6±19.8	47.9±14.3	46.9±12.5	0.70	0.56	1.24
Distancing	48.2±19.4	43.8±16.7	44.1±10.8	0.84	0.52	0.91
Self-control	56.6±21.8	57.2±28.1	55.1±23.9	0.24	0.36	0.12
Finding social support	56.7±15.1	57.2±24.1	56.7±14.2	0.21	0.27	—
Accepting responsibility	33.3±15.5	45.1±25.2	39.2±16.3	2.42 **	0.83	2.18 *
Escape	56.9±22.4	55.8±20.4	52.1±21.3	0.55	1.09	1.42
Planning a solution to the problem	66.8±18.1	63.5±22.2	60.1±17.4	0.94	1.04	1.34
Positive reevaluation	78.2±19.9	65.2±21.6	66.3±18.1	2.39 **	0.75	3.60 **

Note: \* –  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p \leq 0.001$ , group 1 – work experience up to 5 years; group 2 – work experience 5–10 years; group 3 – work experience 10–15 years.

From Table 3 it can be seen that the indicators of the use of coping mechanisms by police officers of all three groups remain practically unchanged throughout the entire period of service in the internal affairs bodies.

Thus, the most common coping mechanism in the subject groups is “Positive reappraisal”. Police officers with up to 5 years of service in the internal affairs bodies (78.2 ± 19.9) statistically reliably ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) use positive reappraisal more often than police officers with 5–10 years of service (65.2 ± 21.6) and more than 10 years (66.3 ± 18.1). Based on this result, police officers with up to 5 years of service have a more positive attitude towards various problems, rethink them, and view them as a stimulus for personal growth than police officers with 6 years of service or more.

The next most important aspect is coping – “problem-solving planning”. When police officers at various stages of their professional development encounter challenging situations, they purposefully analyze them and develop strategies for resolving them.

Coping mechanism significantly differs across groups. For example, average scores gradually decrease among young law enforcement officers with less than 5 years of service ( $56.9 \pm 22.4$ ), among those with 5–10 years of service ( $55.8 \pm 20.4$ ), and among police officers with 10 years or more of service ( $52.1 \pm 21.3$ ). This suggests that, with increasing seniority, police officers are less likely to avoid responsibility and deny the existence of problems that require solutions.

Coping mechanisms “Seeking Social Support” and “Self-Control” are almost identical in the three groups. That is, police officers on duty in the internal affairs agencies seek help from others and seek various information from citizens. By applying self-control, police officers suppress emotional feelings and move to rational actions. However, overregulating their emotions leads to overexertion and provokes psychosomatic disorders.

Employees in the first group are more likely to use coping mechanisms such as “Confrontational Coping” ( $53.6 \pm 19.8$ ) and “Distancing” ( $48.2 \pm 19.4$ ) than employees in the second and third groups. With moderate use of the confrontation strategy, employees in the first group are more capable of resisting difficulties, demonstrating energy and initiative in resolving problematic situations, and the ability to defend their own interests. When distancing themselves from various problematic situations, their subjective significance and involvement decrease.

Representatives of all groups of subjects with different lengths of service demonstrated a less pronounced “Acceptance of Responsibility” mechanism. Police officers with 5–10 years of service ( $45.1 \pm 25.2$ ) were statistically significantly ( $p \leq 0.001$ ) more likely to choose coping by accepting responsibility than officers with up to 5 years of service ( $33.3 \pm 15.5$ ) and statistically significantly ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) more likely to choose coping by accepting responsibility than officers with more than 10 years of service ( $39.2 \pm 16.3$ ).

The results of the study of the characteristics of coping behavior in stressful situations of employees of the internal affairs bodies with different professional experience are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

**Features of coping behavior in stressful situations of employees of the internal affairs bodies with different professional experience ( $\bar{x} \pm \sigma$ , points)**

Type and coping behavior	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	t 1–2	t 2–3	t 1–3
Orientation to solve the problem	33.1 ±23.88	54.09 ±39.96	60.95 ±47.08	2.78 *	3.56 **	0.98
Focus on emotions	54.97 ±38.98	36 ±27.09	37.79 ±29.14	2.78 *	2.23 *	0.52
Orientation to avoid	57.9 ±42.78	37.9 ±28.94	50.91 ±29.88	2.44 *	0.77	1.64

Note: \* –  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* –  $p \leq 0.001$ , group 1 – work experience up to 5 years; group 2 – work experience 5–10 years; group 3 – work experience 10–15 years.

The effectiveness of law enforcement officers in complex, stressful, and especially extreme situations is determined by the development of adaptive coping strategies and the low importance of the “Avoidance” strategy. We have demonstrated that, over time, law enforcement officers develop effective coping strategies: “Problem-focused” coping, while the importance of “Emotion-focused” and “Avoidance” strategies decreases. This optimal stress management mechanism ensures the officers’ performance.

**Conclusions.** The main psychological defense mechanisms of police officers from different departments and with varying lengths of service in the police department are rationalization, denial, and projection. Rationalization becomes a barrier to any experiences caused by unpleasant situations, using logical arguments regardless of evidence to the contrary. It begins to be used to justify destructive behavior, which may be illegal. Police officers deny existing external problems that are obvious to others through denial. In this way, they reduce anxiety and do not take seriously information that threatens self-preservation, self-esteem, and social prestige. Projection is used to justify oneself, attributing negative personality traits, feelings, aggressive behavior, or ill will to others.

In difficult life situations, police officers from various departments and with varying lengths of service employ coping mechanisms such as planning, positive reappraisal, and escape to overcome difficulties. Planning demonstrates that when police officers encounter problematic situations, they are able to purposefully analyze them and develop strategies for resolving them, drawing on past experience to minimize mistakes. Positive reappraisal allows them to view difficulties positively and find motivation to achieve goals and develop personal development. Escape is used to avoid negative experiences, denying the existence of existing problems that require solutions.

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