

Mental Health in Altruism Scenarios: Coping Strategies in Volunteers of The Civil Defense of The Mojana Sucreña Area – Colombia

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Abstract

Introduction: Coping strategies are of vital importance for Civil Defense volunteers because they can cope with the stress and emotional demands associated with their work, ensuring their well-being and their ability to provide quality assistance to affected communities. Objective: To describe the coping strategies used by the volunteers of the Colombian Civil Defense - Mojana Sucreña area during natural disasters. Method: Research framed under a positivist paradigm, quantitative descriptive type, the population chosen were 148 volunteer leaders of the Civil Defense to whom the modified Coping Strategies Scale (EEC-M) was applied to identify the strategies most used by these leaders when facing a calamity where their urgent intervention is required. Results: The strategies most used by the volunteers by factors were: religion (79.7%) and seeking professional support (79.1%), which indicates that the volunteers cling to God and seek the opinion of a professional to resolve any conflict that may arise. Now, the most limited strategy by the volunteers is the expression of the difficulty of Coping (70.3%) and Denial (64.2%) which means that it is difficult for them to express their difficulties. Conclusion: Keep in mind that each person has different ways of coping with stress and adverse situations. Some strategies may be more effective than others, and it is essential to provide Civil Defense volunteers with the necessary tools and support to develop adaptive coping strategies.

Keywords: Coping Strategies, Natural Disasters, Civil Defense Volunteers

INTRODUCTION

For years there has been an attempt to understand the dynamics that human beings go through when they are submerged in situations that generate stress and that they try to manage through certain strategies; these strategies require cognitive and behavioral "effort" to handle external demands (environmental, stressors) or internal (emotional state) and that is evaluated as something that exceeds the resources of the person (Hernández, Conesa & Belchi, 2006). According to the above definition, a civil defense volunteer who makes good use of coping strategies is able to provide effective help to the population that requires it, while feeling comfortable with himself/herself. On the contrary, a volunteer who ignores coping strategies may be affected in his or her behavior and health (Escamilla, Rodríguez, González 2009; Aguado, 2005). Thus, inadequate coping is an acute stressful situation that can lead to chronic stress and the development of negative emotional and psychopathological states (Escamilla, Rodríguez, González 2009; Aguado, 2005), as well as impaired decision-making ability (Herrera S, Fernandez, B, Barros, 2018).

In addition to the above, it should be noted that nowadays several situations directly or indirectly cause discomfort to volunteers and inevitably these cannot be addressed by them before they occur, because they do not have the resources to anticipate a disaster.

Civil Defense plays a fundamental role in the protection and security of society in emergencies and natural disasters. The volunteers of this organization are people who offer their time and effort to help the affected

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communities. However, this work is not exempt from stressful situations that can affect both their emotional well-being and their ability to provide effective assistance.

It is in this context that coping strategies acquire fundamental importance. These strategies are the mechanisms that people use to cope with adverse situations, to manage stress and emotional demands (Herrera, Fernandez, Barros, 2018). In the case of civil defense volunteers, effective coping is essential to ensure their well-being and their ability to provide help effectively. First, coping strategies are key tools for Civil Defense volunteers to deal with the stress and emotional demands that arise in emergencies. These situations can generate a wide range of emotional reactions, such as anxiety, fear, and sadness. By developing and using appropriate coping strategies, volunteers can healthily manage their emotions and minimize the negative impact on their psychological well-being.

Contextualizing the problem, the Department of Sucre, more specifically the Mojana Sucreña area of Colombia, has a group of volunteers from the Colombian Civil Defense who are responsible for carrying out operational activities in disaster risk management, assisting the community in any case that represents a threat to the life of the person. In addition to this, according to reports provided by the Colombian Civil Defense during these years the Department of Sucre has been the visible head in the attention of emergencies, such as those caused by heavy rains in the area of La Mojana, where winter year after year leaves heavy losses at material and human level, as well as millions of victims. Therefore, it is pertinent to say that in the last 28 years, Colombia has been one of the most vulnerable countries to natural disasters in the Americas. A report presented by the National Planning Directorate (DNP) reveals that, as of 2008, an average of 597 disasters occur every year in Colombia, surpassing Peru, Mexico, and Argentina. As regards major disasters, the Colombian Civil Defense highlights interventions from 1970 to 2013, some of these interventions have been in the Mojana area of Sucre, since it is an environment prone to major disasters due to its proximity to the Magdalena, Cauca and San Jorge rivers (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe CEPAL, 2012).

It is worth mentioning the floods that occurred between 2010 and 2013, when the Corporation for the Sustainable Development of La Mojana and El San Jorge (Corpomojana) declared a maximum alert, given that floods affected the region for 4 or 5 months, but in recent years the "breakers" caused by the Cauca River and the construction of infrastructure works in the area such as roads, have caused the problem to increase in this sector, as there are currently places where the waters have been stagnant for more than 3 years since 2010 until the end of 2013 (Campos, Holm-Nielsen, Díaz, Rubiano, Costa, Ramírez, Dickson, 2012). Additionally, the overflowing of the river caused the collapse of most of the bridges, producing an area affected by this phenomenon of approximately 25,000 hectares located on the right bank of the San Marcos-Majagual-Achí road, between the municipal capital of San Marcos (Guayepo Bridge), to the village of Cauchal, municipality of San Benito, Boca Seheve and Cecilia in Ayapel - Córdoba (CEPAL, 2012).

In fact, the overflowing of the rivers located in this area affected 204 municipalities, with some 27,944 families affected, for a total of 102,177 people, distributed in these municipalities; of which, the most affected is Sucre, with 30,128 people (Campos, Holm-Nielsen, Díaz, Rubiano, Costa, Ramírez, Dickson, 2012).

Taking into account the above, volunteers are a group especially affected by natural disasters, both because they are direct victims and because they have to assist the population. On many occasions, in their eagerness to help, they face many dangers, sensations, and emotions that sometimes they do not know how to control, resulting in volunteers who are marked and significantly affected (Muñoz, 2017). For this reason, this research raises the following question: What are the coping strategies used by the volunteers of the Civil Defense in the Mojana Sucreña area.

Now, to obtain this information we intend to describe the coping strategies used by the volunteers of the Colombian Civil Defense in the Mojana Sucreña area in situations of natural disasters, contributing in the first instance to the improvement of the mental health and quality of life of the volunteers of the civil defense, and secondly, achieving the prompt intervention of volunteers to reorganize their mental constructs about the concept of autonomy, expression of emotions and denial, which would help the improvement and the overall welfare not only of them but also of the population to whom the service is provided when a natural emergency is unleashed. In addition, it is relevant because it seeks to strengthen a specific theoretical body, by determining

the coping strategies used by the volunteers of the Civil Defense of the Mojana Sucreña Zone, contributing to the development of programs focused on strengthening each of these strategies and thus achieve a better performance of the volunteers in this type of situations. Likewise, from a macro perspective, a significant improvement could be consolidated in the volunteers' way of coping with natural disaster situations, since by taking the necessary measures they would be trained more integrally, taking into account, in addition to the physical, the psychological and emotional part, thus achieving volunteers with more available resources in the face of a stressful event, with better mental health and therefore with skills for an efficient intervention in the community.

Therefore, from a holistic perspective, people with few coping strategies are more likely to become stressed (Lazarus & Folkman, 1991). For this reason, the measurement and evaluation of coping is an essential component for the explanation and conceptualization of the stress process (Berrio, 2022). Coping is a dynamic process, which involves the constant evaluation and reevaluation of people in demanding situations and its function is in line with the strategies that individuals carry out for the achievement of specific objectives (Berrio, 2022)

It is evident then that the environment where volunteers perform their work of rescuing lives and belongings plays an important role in the occurrence of stressful situations, which is influenced not only by contextual characteristics but also by the personal characteristics of each volunteer, facilitating in some way stressful behaviors (Vega C. Villagrán M, Nava C, Soria, 2012; Barrio, 2000; Jimenez, Amarís & Valle, 2012), which reaffirms the importance of the use of coping strategies because if they use them they can feel better and perform their work.

Cognitive appraisal and coping are two mediators of the constant individual-environment interaction, which are difficult to separate (Lazarus & Lazarus, 2000). Assessment is carried out in three phases: in the first phase, it is said that the person evaluates the situation he/she is facing, analyzes in advance what he/she is going to do, and can foresee the gains or losses of such a situation. In the second phase, the person seeks to determine the actions to be taken to cope with the stressor and the perception of coping skills. That is, the person analyzes what qualities he/she has to resolve the stressful event he/she is facing. And finally, the person puts into action everything that he/she has previously thought and imagined. This means that the person realizes everything he/she has planned.

METHOD

Type of Study

The research was framed under a positivist paradigm since it was intended to know the reality that could be observable and measurable with the purpose that the results are within objectivity. The approach was quantitative of a descriptive type since it was intended to specify characteristics, peculiar and/or differentiating features related to the sample to be studied as it is presented in reality.

Participants

The population consisted of 242 active volunteer leaders from the Mojana region of Sucre; this group is made up of the municipalities of Majagual, Guaranda and Sucre-Sucre (Colombia), distributed among 82 women and 160 men. The sample was made up of 148 volunteer leaders, who had to meet the inclusion criteria: be leaders who are volunteers, be of legal age, have attended an emergency, live in the Mojana Sucreña Zone, and be volunteers willing to participate in the process.

Instrument

The data collection instrument was the modified Coping Strategies Scale (EEC-M) made up of 69 items with Likert response options in a frequency range of 1 Never, 2 Almost never, 3 Sometimes, 4 Frequently, 5 Almost always, and 6 Always. It contains 12 scales, each one evaluated from statements ranging from 2 to 9 questions. This scale identifies the Cognitive, Behavioral and Cognitive-Behavioral dimensions (Londoño. 2006).

RESULTS

Based on the application of the modified Coping Strategies Scale (EEC-M) applied to 148 volunteer leaders. The results by dimensions are presented below.

Cognitive Dimension

Regarding the coping strategies present in the participants of the study, it was evidenced that in the cognitive dimension at a general level, most of the volunteers always apply the strategy.

COMENTARIO: TODAS LAS TABLAS SE MODIFICARON Y LOS DECIMALES SE SEPARARON CON PUNTO.

Table 1. The cognitive dimension of the volunteers.

Cognitive dimension	Troubleshooting	Cognitive avoidance	Positive reassessment	Autonomy
Always	72.3%	55.40%	60.10%	25.70%
Sometimes	5.4%	4.10%	13.50%	10.80%
Never	22.3%	40.50%	26.40%	63.50%

Regarding problem-solving, the majority of volunteers in the Mojana Sucreña area, with 72.3% of the surveyed population, use the coping strategy problem-solving, which indicates that they look for acceptable alternative solutions that are in accordance with the context or the situation they face; while 5.4% of the volunteers use it sporadically and 22.3% of the volunteers do not use this strategy at all.

Regarding the cognitive avoidance strategy, 55.4% of the volunteers seek to eliminate or neutralize thoughts through distraction or denial. Some 4.1% of the volunteer leaders use this strategy sporadically or occasionally and 40.5% do not use this strategy, in other words, they do not eliminate or neutralize their thoughts in order to feel better in difficult situations.

Regarding positive re-evaluation, 60.1% of the volunteers surveyed in the Zona Mojana Sucreña apply this strategy, meaning that this group of people tends to evaluate and analyze different situations and focus only on the positive aspects or those that generate profits; 13.5% make frequent use of this strategy, and 26.4% do not use this type of behavior in their life routine.

In addition, volunteers scored 63.5% as not autonomous. In other words, they require the help of other people, bosses, or leaders to help them undertake activities to feel better or solve their problems, 10.8% make irregular use of their autonomy and only 25.7% consider themselves autonomous and do not require a leader figure to satisfy their needs or undertake activities.

Behavioral Dimension

Regarding the search for social support, 58.1% of the volunteers make use of this strategy. That is, a significant part of the volunteers do tell their friends about their problems or difficulties. Meanwhile, 26.4% do not have these characteristics. That is, when they have a problem, they tend to keep quiet and not share it with their friends or close people. Continuing with this strategy, 15.5% sometimes do talk to friends and in other situations prefer to remain silent.

Consisting of seeking the opinion of a professional, e.g. (I talk about the problem with people who have more experience than me), 79.1% seek professional help to solve the problem or its consequences, which is positive for the well-being of the volunteers. However, 13.5% of the volunteers do not take this support into account to solve their conflicts. 7.4% sometimes use this strategy.

Table 2. Behavioral dimension of the volunteers.

Behavioral Dimension	Search for social support	Search for professional support	Aggressive reaction	Expression of coping difficulty
Always	58.10%	79.10%	55.40%	15.50%
Sometimes	15.50%	7.40%	14.90%	14.20%
Never	26.40%	13.50%	29.70%	70.30%

Table 2 shows that 55.4% of the volunteers, after facing a stressful situation or problem, do not respond violently or aggressively. This is inferred because the percentage of aggressiveness is low; on the other hand, 29.7% do meet the characteristics of aggressive people. Therefore, they do have aggressive reactions after facing a stressful or difficult situation; only 14.9% are in the middle of the two extremes.

Regarding the expression of coping difficulties, 70.3% find it difficult to express their difficulties. Similarly, it is difficult for them to recognize and ask for help when they face a problem, but 15.5% know how to express it. On the other hand, they make it known that they need help or that it is difficult for them to face a given situation. On the other hand, 14.2% sometimes do express that they have difficulties and sometimes do not express it. This allows us to say that a high percentage of volunteers are self-conscious when they have difficulties. This leads to the fact that they do not feel good, and therefore seek help.

Cognitive-Behavioral

Regarding this dimension, 54.7% of the volunteers do not expect the problems to solve themselves, while 29.8% expect that sometimes the situation will solve itself, and 15.5% do not give importance to the solution of the problem, indicating that volunteers are people who make quite high use of this coping strategy described in the theoretical references, therefore these volunteers instead of looking for a solution to their problems are better off waiting for the situation to resolve itself or over time.

Regarding religion, 79.7% of the volunteers have a lot of hope, and faith and cling to God through prayers when they have or face a stressful situation, such as in the case of a natural disaster emergency. While 11.5% of the volunteers are in an intermediate situation, 8.8% do not give importance to prayers or prayers when facing stressful situations.

Table 3. Cognitive-behavioral dimension of the volunteers.

Cognitive-Behavioral	Wait for	Religion	Emotional avoidance	Denial
Always	54.70%	79.70%	53.40%	64.20%
Sometimes	29.80%	11.50%	13.10%	7.40%
Never	15.50%	8.80%	33.10%	28.40%

Table 3 shows that 53.4% of the volunteers avoid expressing their emotions when they have faced or are facing a situation that triggers a stressful reaction; while 33.1% of them do express their emotions, and 13.1% of them are in an intermediate phase. All in all, it is shown that the volunteers notoriously avoid expressing how they feel when faced with an event that has occurred or is occurring in their lives.

With regard to denial, 64.2% of the volunteers do not deny, evade or flee from the problem when it arises. This indicates that more than half of the sample of volunteers face the problem and do not use or seek excuses to avoid the situation they are facing, making good use of this coping strategy.

DISCUSSION

The participants of this study are the volunteers of the Colombian Civil Defense in the Mojana Sucreña area in Colombia, who have faced a series of situations where they assist the winter wave that occurs in this area most of the year, which is why the objective of this research focused on describing the coping strategies used by them during natural disasters.

Now, from the results of this study it is evident that the dimension most used is the Cognitive-Behavioral Dimension, which indicates that they respond positively to problem-solving, select their ideas and avoid negative thoughts, are autonomous, and have positive reevaluations. This is since coping strategies are those ideas that the individual applies to reduce negative responses to a stressful situation and this provides emotional stability (Jiménez et al., 2012).

Coping strategies can influence the quality of help that volunteers provided to affected people. A volunteer who has developed appropriate coping skills is better equipped to remain calm in crises, make informed

decisions, and provide more effective emotional support (Berrio, 2022). This not only benefits the people affected, but also increases the volunteers' satisfaction and sense of accomplishment.

Coping strategies enable volunteers to deal with the difficult and traumatic situations they may face in their humanitarian work. These situations can generate a wide range of negative emotions, such as sadness, anger, frustration, or even anxiety. By developing and using appropriate coping strategies, volunteers can process and regulate these emotions, minimizing the negative impact on their psychological well-being (Berrio, 2022).

Within the results of the present research, it was observed that the least used dimension by the volunteers of the Mojana Sucreña zone is the Behavioral, this indicates that it is important to highlight that not all coping strategies are equally effective. Coping strategies play a crucial role in the lives of Civil Defense volunteers, by developing and using effective coping strategies, these people can face the emotional and physical challenges of their humanitarian work, ensuring their well-being and their ability to provide quality help (Berrio, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Coping strategies are individual resources that people use to manage internal or external demands that are qualified as overwhelming. Emergencies and disasters are in fact, due to their sometimes unexpected component or due to factors such as the interruption of the community's daily life, bringing about the expression of feelings, overflowing emotions, or out of control. This expression, together with the ability to continue with one's own life and that of the community, will be determined by coping strategies. This can demonstrate how these efforts are what allow people to place themselves in different coping styles according to the stressful situations they may face (e.g., a disaster).

The research that was carried out reflected in a medium phase that the volunteers make inadequate use of coping strategies, taking into account that they face an environment of constant environmental disasters. As can be seen, the volunteers make greater use of the cognitive-behavioral dimension, specifically the strategy of seeking professional support, but taking into account the conditions of the context where the volunteers develop, it is evident that in this place there are no professionals trained in this area to assist the volunteers once they have been affected by the help they have given to their population when a disaster or catastrophic event occurs. This is not an adequate strategy if we want them to be well enough to continue assisting the affected population. Moreover, taking into account the results, it can be observed that volunteers find it difficult to ask for help and to express that they feel bad. This affects the process of helping and affects them as volunteers and as people.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE AUTHORS

The first author: conceived the research, helped write the article, and applied the instruments.

The second author: conceived the research, helped write the article, and analyzed the data.

The third author: conceived the research, helped write the article, and conducted the search for bibliographic information.

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