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Coping Strategies Used for Combating Stress and Burnout: A Qualitative Study Among Sri Lankan Prison Officers

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Abstract: Coping strategies are specific methods used in managing the internal and external demands faced by individuals, which are found to be going beyond their resources. This qualitative study aimed to describe the coping strategies adopted by Correctional and Rehabilitation Officers working in Sri Lankan prisons to reduce their stress and subsequent burnout. The study was carried out in 2017 in the Welikada Closed Prison and Badulla Remand Prison. Twenty prison correctional and rehabilitation officers participated in in-depth interviews. Officers with experience of more than two years in the prison setting were included. Both officers with and without burnout were selected based on the findings of a previous component of the study, with one rehabilitation officer and nine correctional officers from each category. A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was used. Thematic analysis was carried out. Both male and female officers between 23 and 55 years participated in the interviews. Some of the common problems leading to stressful situations were increased workload with additional and irrelevant duties expected from them, poor relationships with superiors, colleagues and inmates and poor support and pressure from the superiors. Six themes were extracted from the content discussed during the interviews. These were discussing with others as a means of seeking support, positive thinking, avoidance of the situation, distraction by involving in other activities, deviating the stress to others and trying to remove or reduce the stressor. Some of the participants thought they needed to learn better ways of coping with the occupational stress and burnout. Many of them believed that workshops on stress management need to be included in their continuous training. The high rank prison officials responsible for the welfare of prison officers were informed of the findings following the study, in order for them to make necessary improvements at the institution and policy level.

Keywords: Coping strategies, Stress, Stressor, Prison officers, Positive thinking

1. Introduction

Different coping strategies are adopted by people to face the stress and subsequent burnout they encounter. Coping can be defined as 'cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific internal and external demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the person's resources' (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In different literature, coping strategies are categorized as problem focused or emotion focused (Folkman et al., 1986), and adaptive or maladaptive (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Problem-focused coping attempts to change the problem in the relationship between the person and the environment, which is the focus for the negative emotion, while emotion-focused coping considers the strategies focusing on regulating the negative emotional state itself (Folkman et al., 1986; Krohne, 2002). The common general trends in coping with stress can be cognitive or behavioural coping, cognitive or behavioural avoidance or emotion-focused coping. It is said that burnout can be observed as a progressively developed condition resulting from the use of the ineffective coping strategies professionals use to protect themselves from work related stressful situations (Montero- Marin et al., 2014). It is identified that interventions are more effective when the focus of the use of coping is on promoting the positive counterparts of burnout, rather than on managing symptoms of burnout (Chan, 2010).



Research has been conducted in identifying the coping strategies in burnout around the world, among different occupations (Kravits *et al.*, 2010; Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2014). Different study designs have been used in assessing this. A cross-sectional study was conducted in 2008 in Spain among university employees to assess the association of different coping strategies with the burnout subtypes (Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2014), where burnout subtypes were assessed with the Burnout clinical subtypes questionnaire (Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2011) and coping was assessed with the Spanish version of the Coping Orientation for Problem Experiences (Carver *et al.*, 1989). Multiple linear regression model was used in the study. The three subscales of overload, lack of development and neglect in the questionnaire were assessing the frenetic, under-challenged and worn-out subtypes (Montero-Marin *et al.*, 2016). Overload was mainly explained by coping strategies of venting of emotions, with contributions from 'focus on solving situations' and religion, while venting of emotions and behavioural disengagement explained lack of development. Neglect was only explained by the coping strategy of behavioural disengagement. The study showed that responses shown by burned out employees in coping with stress displayed a progressive decline in the level of engagement.

A study done among teachers in Greece (Antoniou *et al.*, 2013) has found out that rational coping behaviours help the teachers to overcome work-related stressors and burnout in order to achieve their valued outcomes with students. At the same time, the study showed that avoidance coping behaviours predicted high level of stress and burnout. Coping mechanisms were found to be protective in experiencing burnout, in a study conducted among palliative care practitioners in Singapore (Koh *et al.*, 2015). The subjects using more coping mechanisms were found to be having less burnout compared to those who were not. The coping mechanisms identified to be protective against burnout were having hobbies, meditation, physical well-being, passion for the work they do, clinical variety and having realistic expectations. Other coping mechanisms surveyed such as using humour, personal relationships, professional relationships, talking with others and taking time away were not found to be protective against burnout in this study.

In a study conducted by Pathiraja (2011), coping strategies used by Public Health Midwives in the Western Province of Sri Lanka have been assessed using the validated Sinhala version of the Brief COPE (Carver, 1997). The 28-item questionnaire has been judgmentally validated and subjected to factor analysis for construct validity. Emotion- focused, problem-focused and dysfunctional coping strategies have been assessed using it, where the mean scores had been obtained for each type of coping strategies. In the bivariate analysis, problem-focused coping and dysfunctional coping had been found to be significantly different between burned out and non-burned-out midwives. In the multivariate analysis also, dysfunctional coping had been found to be positively associated with burnout, whereas problem-focused coping was negatively associated.

A qualitative study design has also been followed by Pathiraja (2011), as a component of his study, to identify the coping strategies used by the Public Health Midwives. Using in-depth interviews as the method of extracting data, purposively selected midwives both with and without burnout have been interviewed. Seven themes have been identified, including religious coping, seeking support, active coping, venting, positive thinking, self-blame and self-distraction. The study found that coping strategies differed according to the problem, as well as the person. He has identified active coping, positive thinking and acceptance as strategies more commonly adopted by the non-burned-out midwives, while self-blame and self-distraction were more common among the those with burnout. Social support and religious coping were observed invariably among both groups. It was concluded that the way of adopting any coping strategy was seen to be different among the two groups, and personality also played a role on the coping strategies adopted. The study has stressed on the importance of identifying the correlates and coping strategies of burnout in order to identify the preventive strategies to empower the employees, as it could lead to improvement of their quality of work life directly.

A study using a qualitative approach and case study design has been carried out among a convenient sample of 25 correctional officers employed at Leeuwkop prison, Medium B and Maximum facility in South Africa (Raphadi, 2017), to assess their coping strategies. It was revealed that correctional officers engage in sports in the prison such as soccer as one of the coping strategies. Other methods included making use of employee assistance programmes, while some of them had used less conventional ways of coping such as absenteeism and alcohol use.

A study has tried to identify the experiences of the prison officers who worked with the convicted offender Anders Behring Breivik in the days and weeks following the terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011 (Sorensen & Johnsen,



2021). Informal talks and qualitative interviews had been carried out with 11 prison officers and 10 managers who worked at Ila prison at the beginning of Breivik's imprisonment. According to this study, the concerned prison officers have tried to cope by avoiding emotionally challenging situations, engaging in mental relaxation and making certain social and media arrangements.

A service development project using a qualitative approach has been carried out among 74 staff members in a local Category B remand male prison (Dennard *et al.*, 2021). Anonymized responses were analyzed using thematic analysis, where one of the six themes was coping strategies. The identified subthemes under coping strategies were talking about it, behavioural strategies and cognitive strategies. Talking to colleagues, friends and family and spending time with others were identified as subthemes under talking about it, while behavioural strategies included physical exercise, sports, reading, travel, music, television, drinking and smoking. Acceptance, learning, adjusting one's outlook, writing things down and bottling things up were subthemes identified under cognitive strategies.

A qualitative phenomenological study has been carried out to explore the experiences of six correctional educators in the Correctional Education Association working in maximum and medium secured prisons, with regard to their stress handling and coping strategies while at their classrooms (Burrison-Meade, 2020). The identified coping strategies adopted by them included listening to music, walking the dog, drinking, avoiding looking up students' criminal records and exercising at the gym.

Use of effective coping methods in the prison officers could benefit them as well as the inmates under their care, since they would be more favourable towards rehabilitation, rather than towards punishment. Harizanova (2014) has assessed the relationship between burnout and some maladaptive coping strategies such as smoking, excessive alcohol consumption and substance use among prison officers. It was revealed that the level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were significantly higher among the excessive alcohol users. High emotional exhaustion was seen among those who were involved in Substance abuse. A study conducted among Brazilian prison officers revealed that higher mean scores of emotional exhaustion and lower scores of professional accomplishment were seen among employees who consumed alcohol (Campos *et al.*, 2016). Studies were not found to have been conducted previously among Sri Lankan prison officers or prison officers in the region, to identify the coping strategies they use for combating their stress and burnout.

This qualitative interview study was conducted as one component of a broader study carried out in 2017 to assess the burnout of prison officers in Sri Lanka. The aim of this study was to describe the coping strategies adopted by Correctional and Rehabilitation Officers working in Sri Lankan prisons to reduce their stress and subsequent burnout.

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative study was conducted using in-depth interviews, in order to extract in-depth information on the coping strategies adopted by the correctional and rehabilitation officers. As a form of qualitative research, in-depth interviews are useful when detailed information about personal thoughts and behaviours are needed to be assessed. They are superior to focus group discussions on instances where the participants may not feel comfortable to talk openly in a group. Further, they are favourable in situations where individual opinions need to be extracted rather than the opinion of a group (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The coping strategies were related to behaviours of individuals, and it was evident through previous discussions with officers at the prison that they preferred to communicate their ideas and feelings at face-to-face interviews rather than at wider forums and would not reveal much at group discussions. The intention of the study was to gather information on individual behaviours and ideas rather than to come to a consensus. Thus, in-depth interviews were selected as the qualitative method to extract the coping strategies of the prison officers.

This component of the study was carried out as the final component of the broader study on burnout of prison officers, and the burnout of the prison officers had been identified by this point. Out of the variety of prisons used in the other components of the study, one closed prison and one remand prison already included in the previous component, were selected for this qualitative component. Accordingly, Welikada closed prison and the Badulla remand prison were used as the study settings for this component. The correctional officers and rehabilitation officers



who participated for the quantitative components of the study were considered as the study population for this component. Out of them, only the officers who have been working in the prison setting for more than two years of duration were included, in order to obtain more information and experiences. The participants were recruited purposively using the contact information they had provided in the previous components of the study, so those who have not mentioned their contact details in the questionnaire of the previous component for further reference to communicate their burnout status were excluded.

With regard to sample size in qualitative interviews, the number is of less importance. When the same issues, themes and topics are arising from the respondents, it implies that the saturation point has been reached, and the adequate sample size has been achieved (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Dworkin, 2012). Assuming that the saturation point will be reached after completing around 20 interviews, ten each with burned out officers and non-burned-out officers, it was planned to carry out twenty in depth interviews. Following the interviewing of ten prison officers suffering from burnout and ten prison officers who were not, the principal investigator was in the view that the saturation point has been achieved, and further interviews would not yield any new information and themes. Thus, the sample size remained at twenty.

Since ten officers each from burnout and non-burnout categories were to be selected, considering the number of correctional and rehabilitation officers in the service, it was decided to interview one rehabilitation officer from each category, and the rest to be recruited from the correctional officers. A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was developed by the principal investigator, through an extensive literature search on coping strategies, and with expert opinion, to be used during the interviews. This guide included the overview of the questions and the issues to be explored during the interview. The guide started with the initial introduction of the interview, and how confidentiality would be ensured. The questions began with an enquiry about their life at work and went on to ask about the issues faced at work, any stress felt at work and how it affected them, and when and how often they felt stressed, as an ice-breaker. Thereafter, the ways they adopted to reduce the stress/burnout they felt were inquired as an open question for the respondents to have a free flow of thoughts. Several identified problem-focused, emotion-focused and dysfunctional coping methods were listed in the guide. Following the free flow of thoughts of the respondent, and also during that process when relevant, the methods not touched by the respondent were brought into discussion to identify whether they were adopting those methods also. The questions were not intended to be asked as closed ended questions and were planned to be used to generate discussion. In the latter part of the guide, a few questions were there to ask about how they felt about their coping strategies, and their perception on the need for better methods. The guide was pre-tested on a correctional officer and a rehabilitation officer working at the prison headquarters, who had regular contact with inmates during their work.

The principal investigator conducted the in-depth interviews of the correctional and rehabilitation officers, with one of the study assistants acting as the note-taker for all the interviews. The principal investigator was trained on conducting the in-depth interviews by a sociologist and a public health expert having vast experience in conducting in-depth interviews. The study assistant was trained by the principal investigator on note taking, with special emphasis on how to note down the verbal comments as well as the non-verbal expressions.

The selected participants were greeted and were explained about the objectives of this component of the study using an information sheet before obtaining informed written consent. The important information regarding the study, as well as details on voluntary participation and freedom of withdrawal from the study at any stage, was fully explained to all the study participants. However, they were not informed of their burnout status prior to the interview. As they had already participated in the previous components of the study, they had an idea about the concept and were very cooperative. All the approached participants consented to participate but requested not to record the conversations. The investigators complied to their request, and thus only written notes were produced, for which the participants did not have any objections. Informed written consent was taken from the participants. The interviews were held in places where privacy was maintained to the maximum possible level, and only the interviewee, principal investigator and the note-taker were present there during the interviews. The investigator encouraged free flow of thoughts of the respondents, while redirecting the conversation to the subject, when necessary. The in-depth interview guide was used when necessary, to explore all the areas planned to be explored during the interview. Probing was done as and when necessary. Following the interview, the respondents were informed of their burnout status and the necessary instructions were given.



Thematic analysis approach was used for analyzing the qualitative data collected through the in-depth interviews. At the end of each interview, the principal investigator and the note-taker went through the written notes, and necessary clarifications were done. Transcribing the data and reading and re-reading the data was done to get familiarized with the data. Narratives written down were specifically clarified and confirmed as correct, since recordings were not available. Initial codes were generated, by coding interesting features of the data in a systemic way across the entire dataset. The codes were then collated into potential themes. Themes were clearly defined and named, and the final report of data was developed. In addition to that, the comments and statements decided to be most useful were taken as narratives in the exact way they were delivered, in order to further emphasize the main ideas.

Ethics approval was obtained for the entire study from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya, and permission to carry out the study in the selected prisons was officially granted by the Commissioner of Prisons. In addition to this, verbal permission was sought on arrival at the prison from the Superintendent of the Prison. The confidentiality of the collected data was strictly maintained. The notes of the in-depth interviews were always kept with the principal investigator under lock and key.

3. Results

Ten burned out participants and ten non- burned-out participants who participated in the previous components of the study were selected purposively for this component. Each category consisted of one rehabilitation officer and nine correctional officers. Both male and female officers were involved in the interviews, and the age of the respondents ranged between 23 and 55 years. Around one hour was spent per interview.

The prison officers who participated in the in-depth interviews had a few common problems which led to stressful situations at work. These were increased workload with additional and sometimes irrelevant duties bestowed upon them, relationships with superiors, colleagues and sometimes inmates being poor, and poor support and pressure from the superiors. Some mentioned that they became angry and at times sad and disappointed during those situations. Most of the burned-out officers declared that they felt stressed almost every working day. Both burned out as well as non-burned-out officers found the job to be most stressful when they were pressurized from the top to do additional duties than what is routinely expected from them. Three of the burned-out officers mentioned of getting a severe headache when they got stressful while at work.

During the enquiry of how they faced the stress they were experiencing and what methods they were adhering to, various ideas came up. They were categorized into themes. The six themes identified were: discussing with others as a means of seeking support, positive thinking, avoidance of the situation, distraction by involving in other activities, deviating the stress to others and trying to remove/reduce the stressor.

3.1 Discussing with Others as a Means of Seeking Support

Discussing their issues, stressful situations and the stress they were feeling during those situations with people they were associating with, was found to be a main strategy of coping among the interviewees. It was more prominently seen among the officers who were not having burnout, than among those who were having burnout. Some of the burned-out officers actually mentioned it as a futile method for relieving their stress during their free flow of thoughts.

Many of the non-burned-out prison officers were discussing and sharing their stress with their family members, especially spouses. Talking about the problems that arose at work with the colleagues was also seen among them. Majority of the respondents, both burned out as well as non-burned out, were not discussing their problems and stress at work with their other friends outside the service. Some non-burned-out officers mentioned that they sometimes discussed their stressful issues with their immediate superiors, but also mentioned that it depended on whether that person was ready to listen and give solutions, and also the attitudes of that person. None of the officers had discussed their problems with any long-term inmates whom they were associating basically every day.

"I usually discuss things related to my workplace with my wife. It gives me relief. Even when I had faced a problem at work which bothered me, I go home and tell it to her. I feel that she can look at the problem from a



different point of view, as she is not working inside this place, and is an outsider to this system. She sees in a different angle and has given me solutions many a time in the past." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"Even during difficult situations in my work schedule, such as when I have to go on escorting duties suddenly and have to miss my lunch, she will give me a solution, for example, she will ask me to have my lunch quickly before leaving for the duty next time, so that I would not be in hunger. Even such small things give me a lot of mental relief." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"I tell all my problems at work to my father. My mother is not very helpful in this aspect, but my father is very helpful. He will somehow give me a solution to solve my problems at work. I fully trust his advice, and it had helped me a lot. I know I can rely on his advice." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"Our sir is very good so I can go and talk my problems with him. Even if I can't do a certain duty, I will go and tell him straight-away and he will give me a solution. But you cannot do that with everybody" (non-burned-out officer)

"When I have a problem at work, I talk with the others in the unit. We discuss the issue. They are also familiar with that sort of problems, so they can give me some solutions like, you can do it this way, you could have done it like this, things like that. When you talk with them, they will also help you sometimes, for example, if it is difficult for you to take a leave, if you tell your problem, someone might even change the shift with you" (a burned-out prison officer)

"Actually, I don't have any friends here. Whenever I can, I help the others, but don't make friends with them. There is no use talking with them about your problems because they can't help you." (burned-out prison officer)

Both burned-out and non-burned-out prison officers mentioned that they don't discuss their problems with outside friends.

"I don't discuss the problems here with my friends outside"

"I associate with outside friends, but don't discuss these problems with them"

"No point discussing inside problems with your outside friends because they don't know the setting here"

3.2 Positive thinking

Thinking of the positive aspects of the job was seen mainly with the non-burned-out officers, but the burned-out officers also tried it at times. Trying to think of the positive aspects of the job, as well as the positive aspect of a situation was seen among the respondents.

"Whenever I feel under tension in this job, I try to think that other jobs are also like this. I used to work in the private sector before coming here, and there also you have a lot of work. Compared to that, there are good points in this job, so, I try to console myself by thinking about those aspects." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"I have gained a lot of things due to this job. I built a house, have a family with grown up children who are schooling in good schools, and all that was possible because of this job. When a problem occurs, I think of that, and it helps me to calm down" (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"I try to see the positive side when a problem occurs to me. I also always try to see the humorous side of a tension situation which reduces my tension. Sometimes I tell the others also to do like that." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

3.3 Avoidance of the Situation

Some of the burned-out study participants talked about strategies related to this theme, but none of the non-burned-out officers were found to be adopting these strategies as methods of coping. Taking long-term leave as well as taking leave from time to time, in order to relieve the stress they were feeling at work, was seen among the burned out officers. Also, one officer said sometimes he used alcohol to forget his problems at work. Avoiding discussions on work after work hours was also seen in some.

"When I am in a lot of stress, what I do is put a sick leave and stay at home. This is not the life that I actually expect. I am a very sensitive person, and sometimes I feel this job doesn't suit me." (a burned-out prison officer)



"Sometimes I get a severe headache when I am under a lot of pressure. Then I go to the barracks and stay there till my stress is relieved" (a burned-out prison officer)

"There are times when I take alcohol to forget these problems" (a burned-out prison officer)

"I forget work as soon as I go home. I don't like to talk about work at home. I don't even like anyone asking me about work when I am not on duty" (a burned-out prison officer)

3.4 Distraction by Involving in Other Activities

This method of coping was seen as one of the commonest methods of coping used by the prison officers. Many such strategies were surfaced during the interviews. Both burned out as well as non-burned-out officers were adopting these strategies, but non-burned-out officers were adopting them more. Many were involved in recreational activities such as listening to music, watching television, reading, gardening, sports including rugby, volleyball and cricket, and engaging in physical exercises. Some were refreshed and relieved after having a good sleep. Quite a few were involved in religious activities to relieve their stress, but it was not a very common strategy among the prison officers. Some also mentioned associating with friends and going on trips with them as a method of distraction from the job and the problems related to it.

"Listening to music calms me down. I do it very often, whenever possible"

"When I feel stressed, I go to the ground close by and run a few rounds. It makes me feel fine again"

"I have a grown-up daughter. She and I always light the oil lamp and worship at home in the morning, before I come to work. It gives me a mental relief to face a day at work"

"I try to read 'bana poth' (books on Buddhist philosophy) whenever I have time. And I also listen to sermons by Buddhist priests. I engaged in this practice to relieve my stress"

"I associate with a lot of friends, especially when I go to my hometown. I am happy when I am with them. I forget all my problems..."

3.5 Deviating the Stress to Others

This was also seen among the burned-out prison officers, while one prison officer who was currently non-burned out related his past experience of adopting this as a coping strategy. The officers who were using this as a coping strategy to relieve their stress, were deviating their stress to the inmates, as well as to the family members, which resulted in them having conflicts with these particular categories of people. They admitted themselves that it was not a good way to relieve their stress, but it was happening due to the high amount of pressure they were being subjected to at work.

"When I am having a very busy and stressful day at work, I might get late to go home. There are days when I have planned some activity to be done after work, say for example, to go to a relation's 'bana gedara' (a preaching of Buddhist philosophy by a priest at a relation's house) with the family members. My wife will start calling me, asking me when I am coming and so on, and what happens is I pass all my stress to her and scold her in anger. I know it's not good, but it just happens"

"Sometimes when things have been bad at work that day, I feel angry towards the inmates, and talk to them harshly. However, I try not to treat them badly"

The comments of the non-burned-out officer on his past experience:

"Earlier when I was working at another prison, I used to have a lot of problems with my superiors. When my superior scolded me, I used to put my anger and stress on the inmates and treat them badly. Now, I no longer do so"

3.6 Trying to Remove/Reduce the Stressor

This method related to problem focused coping, was seen among many of the non-burned-out officers, while it was less commonly seen among the burned-out officers. Many of the non-burned officers said that they were adopting certain measures to eliminate or reduce the root cause for the stress they have to undergo. In order to



remove the common stressor of increased workload, they have been adopting to certain strategies like prioritizing their duties, so that the most important and urgent duty is done first, starting the day early so that they have adequate time to do the work, and discussing with the superiors in order to solve the problems which arise at work, so that they are able to do the job more efficiently without disturbances. Some also adopted strategies like planning only what is actually achievable and saying 'no' when something really cannot be done, so that they are not stressed due to increased workload.

"I always try to do what is most urgent at that time. Other things can wait. I don't fall into trouble if I do that way." (a non-burned-out prison officer)

"I try to come to work early as much as possible. When I come late, I have to start work with a stressful mind as there are a lot of things to be done during a short time, so I try to avoid being late"(a non-burned-out prison officer)

"When I have a problem at work, or I am not sure what needs to be done, I meet my immediate superior. If he cannot give a solution, I have even gone to higher levels than that to ask for a solution. Then I am sure I am doing the right thing. No point wasting my time without knowing what is really expected, right..."(a non-burned-out prison officer)

"When I am involved in a number of duties, and another duty is bestowed upon me, I have even said 'no' to my superiors. I don't say it in a harsh way, but I explain that I will only be able to do it once I finish my other work."(a non-burned-out prison officer)

Even though the different themes identified for the coping strategies could not be strictly demarcated as ones that were used by burned out prison officers and ones that were used by non-burned-out prison officers, some coping strategies were more commonly used by the burned-out officers, while some others were used more commonly by non-burned-out officers. Discussing as a means of seeking support, positive thinking and trying to remove/reduce the stressor were methods more commonly used by the non-burned-out officers. The burned-out officers were more commonly seen to be using methods like avoidance of the situation and deviating the stress to others. Distraction by involving in other activities was found to be used by both groups, with more prominence given for it by non-burned-out officers. There was no difference identified between males and females, as well as between correctional and rehabilitation officers. Personality seemed to be playing a role in the coping strategies they used. Many of the burned-out officers, and some of the non-burned-out officers also thought that they needed to know better ways of coping with the occupational stress and burnout. Both burned out, as well as the non-burned-out prison officers mentioned that they have never in their continuous training received any discussions or workshops on stress management, and firmly believed that it was a necessity.

4. Discussion

A qualitative research design was used in the current study, in the form of in-depth interviews. The objective of this component was to explore in-depth, the coping strategies adopted by the study participants in facing the stress and burnout they experienced at work, since it had not been done previously in Sri Lanka. The in-depth interviews were selected over focus group discussions, because it was assumed that the participants would not voice their views, especially views related to their superiors and issues at work, in front of a forum where their colleagues were present. This assumption was proven to be correct, since the participants were quite particular that their view would be considered highly confidential and other colleagues would not overhear them. This was assured during the interviews and was made sure that no one except the principal investigator and the note-taking study assistant overheard them. Further, it was decided that in-depth interviews were superior to focus group discussions when sensitive issues needed to be discussed. However, very highly sensitive issues related to their personal lives were not discussed in the interviews, and thus it was assumed that the participants revealed their actual ideas without concealing them. A good rapport was built with the participants prior to the interviews, in order to improve the quality of the information received during the interview, thus reducing the information bias. In order to minimize the contamination bias, the interviews in each selected prison were conducted during the minimum possible duration of days.

Both burned out and non-burned-out participants identified through the previous component of the study were included in the study, in order to identify any trends and distinctions with regard to the coping strategies they



used. This has been the practice in a previous qualitative study used to assess coping strategies among public health midwives in Sri Lanka (Pathiraja, 2011). Even though there was no exact distinction between the coping strategies used by burned out and non-burned-out participants, certain trends were identified with regard to the coping strategies the two categories used.

Out of the six themes which were identified, discussing with others as a means of seeking support was seen more among the non-burned-out participants, where they discussed their problems with spouses, parents and colleagues, and sometimes with superiors. Dennard's study (Dennard *et al.*, 2021) among prison staff also revealed talking to colleagues, friends and family and spending time with others as coping strategies. Burned out participants were in general seen to be having a negative attitude towards this method, where they talked about the futility of discussing, mentioning that the others could not help them with their problems. Both groups were not in favour of discussing with outside peers or inmates. A qualitative study has also been conducted by Pathiraja (2011) on coping strategies of public health midwives and seeking support has been identified in that study as one of the main themes, found to be seen among both burned out and non-burned-out midwives, but in different ways of application. A burned-out midwife was found to express the uselessness of sharing problems with others. This is similar to the findings from burned out officers in the current study.

Positive thinking was another method of coping identified. This was also seen more among the non-burned-out participants. Thinking about the benefits of the current job and what they have achieved through it were used by them in order to calm them down when the situations were stressful. The burned-out participants most of the time did not talk about such thoughts and were more often mentioning the negative aspects of the job. Acceptance and positive thinking were found to be adopted by midwives who were not burned out, in the study carried out by Pathiraja (2011).

Avoidance of the situation was identified as another method of coping among the study participants, which was more commonly used by the burned-out participants. Taking a day of sick leave to get away from work and dysfunctional coping, in terms of consuming alcohol were seen. Avoiding looking up students' criminal records was seen in Burrison-Meade's (2020) study among prison educators. Avoiding emotionally challenging situations was seen among prison officers in Norway (Sorensen and Johnsen, 2021). Avoidance of the workplace as well as avoidance of talking about work was seen. In studies conducted among prison officers in other countries (Harizanova, 2014; Campos *et al.*, 2016), it had been revealed that there were significant associations ($P < 0.01$) between consuming alcohol, smoking and substance abuse considered to be maladaptive or dysfunctional coping methods, and dimensions of burnout. Absenteeism and alcohol use were seen among South African prison officers (Raphadi, 2017). The current study, though conducted in a qualitative manner, unveiled a dysfunctional coping method in a burned-out officer, which goes along with the findings from these studies. No Sri Lankan studies were available for comparison.

Distraction by engaging in other activities was seen more or less in both groups, with a higher tendency in non-burned-out participants. Engaging in recreational activities and sports, engaging in spiritual activities, interacting with peers and having a good sleep were seen under this method. Dennard and others (2021) found that behavioural strategies including physical exercise, sports, reading, travel, music and television were used by prison officers as coping strategies. Pathiraja (2011) has identified self-distraction as one of the themes in his study on midwives, but in that study, engaging in other activities to distract from the situation was seen more in burned out midwives than in non-burned-out midwives, in contrast to the current study. However, Koh and others (2015) revealed that those who engaged in certain coping strategies like involving in hobbies, meditation and physical well-being were less burned out than those who were not (OR - 0.81, 95% CI: 0.72– 0.92, $P < 0.001$), in a study conducted among palliative care practitioners in Singapore. This finding is somewhat linked to the qualitative findings in the current study. Religious coping was also identified as a main theme in coping in Pathiraja's study, but in the current study, even though religious practices were adopted by some of the officers to distract themselves from the work stress, it was not a very common practice, probably owing to their different work schedules.

Deviating their stress to the others was seen mainly among the currently burned-out participants. They were deviating their stress to their family members, as well as to the inmates, who were their service recipients. This finding related to venting of emotions stresses the importance of reducing the burnout among prison officers, in

order for them to provide a better service for their service recipient inmates. This was not seen as a coping method in the study conducted among Sri Lankan midwives (Pathiraja, 2011).

Apart from these emotion-focused coping methods, trying to remove or reduce the stressor was also evident in the participants, which could be considered under problem focused coping. Methods like prioritizing work, starting work early and discussing with the relevant authorities to solve the problems at work were seen mainly in the non-burned-out participants. Pathiraja's study (2011) also found active coping in order to solve the problem or improve the situation to be one of the coping strategies adopted by non-burned out midwives.

Other studies in Sri Lanka (Pathiraja, 2011) and other countries such as Brazil and Singapore (Koh *et al.*, 2015; Campos *et al.*, 2016) have adopted quantitative study designs to identify the association between coping strategies and burnout. Pathiraja (2011) has identified dysfunctional coping to be positively associated with burnout (OR – 1.42, 95% CI: 1.17-1.73), and problem-focused coping to be negatively associated (OR- 0.57, 95% CI: 0.43-0.74) with burnout. The findings from the qualitative study, though couldn't be directly categorized in to methods used by burned out and non- burned out participants, showed certain trends. Problem focused coping, as well as emotion focused coping methods like distraction by involving in other activities, discussing to seek support to relieve stress, and positive thinking were seen more among non-burned-out participants, while avoidance and deviating the stress to others were seen more in burned out participants. Further, dysfunctional coping method of consuming alcohol to relieve stress was seen in one burned out participant. Also, it was evident that personality of the person also played a role in the coping strategies they adopted. Since personality was not assessed in the current study, this aspect could not be commented on, when looking into their coping strategies.

4.1 Study limitations and guidance for future research

Due to logistic and other practical reasons, this qualitative component of the study was carried out in two selected prisons. There would have been opportunity for gathering more comprehensive information, had the study been carried out covering prisons throughout the country. However, considering the fact that Welikada prison is an institution housing a large number of inmates of different categories, the experience of officers working there was considered to be rich and diverse. Further, since the officers are regularly transferred between prisons as per the transfer schemes, the participating officers were assumed to have had experience in working in many prisons. Future research should focus on how the personality of the individuals would affect their coping strategies, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Conclusion

The study revealed six themes on the coping strategies adopted by the Sri Lankan prison officers in combating with their work stress and burnout, and certain trends were observed between the coping strategies adopted by burned-out and non-burned-out prison officers, though it couldn't be confirmed owing to the study design. This study was considered to be beneficial in enlightening the high rank prison officials responsible for the welfare of the prison officers. A forum was held with their participation to disseminate the study findings (including those of the other components) with recommendations, in order for them to take necessary action, interventions and policy decisions.

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