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# Psychological and Pedagogical Security of Educational Environment in Higher Educational Establishments as a Prerequisite for Successful Adaptation of First-Year Students

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## Abstract

Successful adaptation of first-year students is a topical issue that has, so far, no complete theoretical or practical solution due to constant transformation of school and college education. While some first-year students typically do not go further than their first exams campaign, for many of them, overcoming the pitfalls and risks of their first year is fraught with severe stress, and results in poor adaptation to new conditions that may arise in future settings. One of the factors contributing to successful and fast adaptation to college is the psychological and pedagogical security of educational environment. However, the nature of educational environment and successful adaptation of first-year students are not directly related, but are interdependent: secure environment is a condition for optimum adaptation, while successful adaptation is a condition for psychological and pedagogical security of educational environment. The fundamental premise for creating a secure educational environment for students in their first year that would contribute to their successful adaptation is a person-centred approach built on the anthropocentric practices of learning and pedagogical interaction.

Keywords: coping strategies; students; health; psychological risks; psychological and pedagogical security; adaptation process; interactive anthropocentric practice; secure personality; coping behaviour.

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## **Introduction**

*Purpose of research:* identify and substantiate a set of social and psychological conditions where a college system is viewed as a resource and becomes a factor for ensuring the psychological and pedagogical security of first-year students and their successful adaptation to learning activities.

*Object of research:* psychological and pedagogical security of junior students in the learning environment of a higher educational establishment.

*Subject:* psychological and pedagogical security of learning environment in higher educational establishments as a prerequisite for successful adaptation of first-year students.

*Hypothesis of research:* during their studies, junior college students are exposed to various risks inherent in the learning process, which may affect their well-being and academic progress, and may complicate their adaptation to learning; it is therefore essential to actualise the potential of psychological and pedagogical security of educational environment to ensure successful adaptation of first-year students, which involves:

- identifying the key psychological and adaptation-related difficulties that first-year students may experience;
- developing a programme of psychological and pedagogical support of students in their first year of studies;
- organising a learning process within the paradigm of open education and interactive anthropocentric practices of secure educational environment.

*The purpose and hypothesis of research determine the following objectives:*

1. To identify the role of expectations that first-year students have of potential risks and pitfalls in the adoption of certain behaviours and successful adaptation.
2. To substantiate the structural and dynamic interrelations between the initial response in stressful or crisis situations, protective mechanisms and coping behaviours, and the mental and emotional condition along with the adaptive response.
3. To determine the criteria and efficiency indicators of the system employed by college to ensure the psychological and pedagogical security of first-year students in their learning activities and their successful adaptation.

## **Methodology**

*Research methods:* comparison, analogy, generalisation, analysis and synthesis, empirical methods, such as observation, polling, survey and testing based on the selected methodologies.

*Research base:* Moscow State University of Pedagogy and Education (MSUPE), Moscow State Pedagogical University (MSPU) and Moscow Aviation Institute. The research covered first-year students (n=153).

Our work has led us to significant theoretical conclusions and propositions for optimising the ways in which students can overcome emotional tension in their first year of studies.

The practical value of this research is determined by a potential use of the obtained data in various areas of intramural psychological and pedagogical activities. They will help arrange psychocorrective and pedagogical activities intended to improve the mechanisms of coping by first-year students during the adaptation period based on interactive person-centred pedagogical practices.

### **Theory and problem substantiation**

Entering a college is a tough period for students, which is fraught with stress and difficulties adapting to completely new learning conditions. The relevance of ensuring psychological and pedagogical security of educational environment is determined by the need to address new non-standard tasks requiring the activation by first-year students of their special personal resources. Using the person-centred approach to studying and resolving this problem is necessitated by the fact that student personality must be viewed as the subject of activity (Abul Khanova-Slavskaya, 1993; Kislyakov, 2014; Lyakisheva & Kazakova, n.d; Zinchenko & Zotova, 2010).

A higher educational institution is exposed to both external (positive and negative) and internal factors. The main purpose of psychological and pedagogical support provided by colleges to their first-year students is to create more favourable conditions for the psychological well-being of all the participants of the educational process and ensure proper integration of new students. Today, the priority objectives of investigating the adaptation of students include exploring the psychological peculiarities of mental conditions arising at the initial stages of studying; identifying the psychological and pedagogical conditions for optimising the adaptation process; accelerating the adaptation of first-year students to new activities and lifestyles. The future progress of students and the process of becoming professionals immediately depend on how much the adaptation process takes in terms of time and various costs. If the adaptation process is not efficient enough, it may result in reduced motivation for learning, a loss of interest in mastering the chosen speciality, and a waning desire for self-realisation as the key force behind personal growth and development (Andreeva, 2006; Berezin, 1988; Boronina, Vishnevsky, Didkovskaya & Mineeva, 2001; Suldo, Shaffer & Riley, 2008; Vinogradova, 2008).

Currently, there is a lack of practical development aimed at creating conditions for the psychological and pedagogical security of a person in the system of higher education. Insufficient attention is paid to forming the qualities and personal features of first-year students that would help them feel psychologically secure and adapt successfully (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, 2008; Kharlanova, 2013; Kodzhaspirov & Kodzhaspirova, 2017; Martin & Huebner, 2007; Rubtsov & Zabrodin, 2008).

The basic ideas behind the person-centred approach to forming a secure personality are outlined in the works of Andreeva (2006), Bassin (1969), Zinchenko and Zotova (2010) etc. The characteristics of a student as a subject of extraordinary situations are described by Ananyev (2008), Aguzumtshyan and Muradyan (2009), Berezin (1988) etc.

The theoretical groundwork of our research included the psychoanalytical theory of Freud; the key principles of humanistic psychology; the research by Russian psychologists within the budding theory of personality (Antipov, Vasilyuk, Zeigarnik, Stoykov etc.); the conceptual underpinnings of the individual mode of existence (Frankl, 1990; Leontyev, 1975); the problems of social and psychological adaptation of students (Vinogradova, 2008; Kislyakov, 2014; Osipchukova, 2009); the concepts of psychological support of personality at various stages of its development (Abul Khanova-Slavskaya, 1993; Zhdanova, 2007), the theory and practice of psychological services (Bityanova and Beglova, 2010; Kolosov, Bobylev, & Kruchinin, 2007), the theory of psychological security of personality in educational environment (Rubtsov & Zabrodin, 2008; Kodzhaspirov, 2009), the concept of anthropological approach (Kodzhaspirova, 2016; Polyakova, 2018) (Abul Khanova-Slavskaya, 1993; Ananyev, 2008; Bityanova & Beglova, 2010; Frankl, 1990; Kodzhaspirov, 2009; Kodzhaspirov & Kodzhaspirova, 2017; Kodzhaspirova, 2016; Leontyev, 1975; Polyakova, 2018; Rubtsov & Zabrodin, 2008; Zeigarnik, 2007).

The multivaluedness of the *educational environment* phenomenon with respect to the process of becoming of a specialist at a higher educational establishment requires understanding and taking into account its attributive features, such as: *integrity* (ensured by natural interaction with other systems and sub-systems); *structural uniformity* (as ties and relations between the system components arranged in a certain structure that determines the system's overall behaviour); *hierarchy* (where every component of a system can be viewed as a system itself that includes another system, or in other words every component can simultaneously be a sub-system of this system and comprise another system); *compatibility/incompatibility* with other systems; *stability* (in terms of available consistent feedback); *adaptability* (the ability to adapt to the outside world, the reaction to this world and its impact); and *the capacity for self-improvement* (Yudin, 1997).

Personality security is viewed by most of the above and other researchers as:

- a *characteristic feature of personality* that enables the person to withstand the destructive effects of internal and external forces while preserving viability;
- a *process or specific activity* aimed at identifying, preventing, eliminating and counteracting hazards and threats that can impede the development of personality, society and nation, as well as at creating conditions for favourable life, realisation of life strategies, plans and needs of individuals and achievement of social and public development goals;
- a *state* wherein an individual feels protected (Kislyakov, 2014; Kodzhaspirov & Kodzhaspirova, 2017; Lyz, 2008; Zinchenko & Zotova, 2010).

Based on our research into the problems of forming a personality of secure-type behaviour that can adequately adapt to new life conditions, its structure may be construed as consisting of the following components: cognitive, emotional-volitional, motivational and action-based. Under the existing classification, we have identified three developmental levels of social security: high (system action-based), average (reproductive, locally modelling) and low (adaptive) (Aguzumtsyan & Muradyan, 2009; Kislyakov, 2014; Kodzhaspirov & Kodzhaspirova, 2017; Kolosov, Bobylev, & Kruchinin, 2007; Zinchenko & Zotova, 2010).

In the 1960–70s, English scholars started to use the term *coping* to refer to an individual's behavioural reactions to relieve stress and anxiety. In Russian psychology, it is referred to as a *coping adaptive behaviour* or *psychological overcoming*. 'To cope with a situation' means to overpower the circumstances, to manage them. Richard S. Lazarus is considered the most outstanding theoretician and pioneer in the field of coping. Lazarus (1966) regarded 'coping' as the resource produced by a person to ensure psychological defence against stressful stimuli and as a behaviour managing the situation. The psychological purpose of 'coping' is the person's adaptation to the requirements of a situation enabling the person to manage or mitigate such requirements. So, the key objective of 'coping' is to maintain and ensure a person's well-being, physical and mental health and satisfaction with their social relations (Ivanov & Garanyan, 2010; Ilyukhin, 2011; Karavayeva, 2019; Lazarus, 1966; Tyrsikova, 2012; Zhuravleva, Kryukova & Sergienko, 2008).

The Russian researchers of protective mechanisms made a significant contribution to the exploration of this problem. Of those, the most distinguished is Bassin (1969). He found that the key to protecting the mind is to reduce the subjective significance of the traumatising factor by re-building the whole system of attitudes to alleviate extreme emotional tension and prevent behavioural disarray. Berezin (1988) determined the types of psychological defence mechanisms leveraging and directing an individual's behaviour, reducing anxiety and relieving emotional tension.

Defence mechanisms are adaptive to the extent they are successfully used by students of different years of studies within the overall average indicators for the group they belong to. Adaptive behaviour should be viewed as psychological defence intended to protect the student's personality from the anxieties of intolerable intensity that may occur in the educational process.

Students' adaptation to new forms of learning and to life at college can be presented in the form of contrary tendencies: a tendency for self-preservation through adjustment to new learning conditions and a tendency for self-development formed during studies and urging them to act.

Russian psychology research confirms that psychological defence and coping mechanisms are viewed as the most essential forms of an individual's adaptation processes. When students get in a new educational environment, which is uncertain to them, especially in their first year, they intensify their search for adequate forms of behaviour, or, in other words, adapt their behaviour. This effort is immediately related to the activation of psychological defences and choosing personal coping strategies that will help students adapt to the environment and guide them in finding the way out of potential negative situations. If a student cannot reorganise their personality to adequately cope with the academic process, it can prevent them from mental adaptation.

For stress to turn into eustress (beneficial stress increasing the body's functional reserve and helping it adapt to the stress factor and remove stress), certain learning conditions should be ensured, such as:

- positive emotional background in the educational environment;
- previous experience of handling problems related to the academic load and a positive outlook;
- validation of student's actions by peers, faculty and administration staff;
- sufficient mental and personal resources and elaborate coping strategies to overcome academic stress.

In the process of adaptation, students adjust to changes in their lifestyle by selecting or rebuilding their behavioural strategies. Adaptation spans several stages: balancing, pseudo-adaptation, fitting, and assimilation (Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, 1993; Elizarov, 2007; Kolosov, Bobylev, & Kruchinin, 2007; Lazarus, 1966; Menshikova, 2000; Zhuravleva, Kryukova & Sergienko, 2008).

Osipchukova (2009) identifies the following stages in the adaptation of first-year students and the group they associate with to the new socio-cultural college environment:

- initial stage, where an individual or group realise how they are supposed to behave in a new social environment, but are not yet ready to acknowledge and accept the system of values prevailing in the college environment;
- toleration;
- accommodation, or, put differently, acknowledgement and acceptance by an individual of the key values of the new environment with simultaneous acknowledgement by the new socio-cultural environment of some of the individual's or group's values;
- assimilation, where an individual's or group's values match with those of the environment.

The research by Lyakisheva and Kazakova (n.d.) features students' traits that cause maladaptive behaviours:

- infantile personality traits (inability to take responsibility, lack of actions in overcoming difficulties, weak will);

- inability to build positive relationships, peevishness;
- inadequate self-esteem.

The scholars recorded the relation between the level of comfort, the group cohesion index and successful adaptation of students. The intellectual level of success is a secondary factor.

Turmasova and Yudeeva (2016) identified the peculiarities of successful college adaptation of first-year students, specifically, the timely identification of difficulties and determining the ways of how to overcome them, as successful problem handling makes it possible to enhance the students' activities and interest in learning, and form skills instrumental in their further professional pursuits.

Student's age, social background or the type of educational establishment that the student graduated from refer to the *sociological factor*, which determines whether the adaptation of first-year students will be successful; the *psychological factor* includes individual psychological and socio-psychological components, intelligence, orientation, adaptation potential and status in the group. The *pedagogical factor* implies the level of the faculty's professional skills, the organisation of the educational environment and the subject matter activities.

The work for psychological and pedagogical support of first-year students may be carried out at classes and throughout the educational process, provided the organisation of subject-subject interaction and the choice of teaching and education methods are correct from the perspective of problem research and developing approaches based on interactive anthropocentric practices. As the scholars' vast experience, research in this area and many years of observations suggest, the most effective methods here are interactive methods (discussion, problem-oriented talks, training sessions); games (role games and mock business scenarios); heuristic methods (analysis of specific scenarios, case studies, brainstorming, ethical conversations); project method; nurturing critical faculties (critical analysis, reflexive practical training sessions) and other currently evolving person-focused techniques and methods. In the work with first-year students, the focus should be on equipping students with self-guidance and self-education techniques, which most of them have not mastered well enough to study at college.

Students are taught through joint activities, continuous exchange of information, team handling of various problems, assessment and self-assessment of their own and peers' actions, as well as creating social security of the educational space. The subject-subject interaction should be based on compliance by the participants with humanistic principles of equality, mutual respect, understanding and sympathy, co-creation, cooperation, and mutual respect.

Secure personal and professional development of students is ensured by boosting the attractiveness and prestige of their future occupations and revealing the humanistic nature thereof, actualising the standard (ideal) of a specialist in their future focus areas; creating and implementing personally and socially significant prospects in educational and professional activities, and encouraging students for self-improvement. It is not only knowledge that the educational process must eventuate in, but a socially mature and, consequently, a socially secure personality.

Teachers working with students in their first year, especially mentors and tutors, play a key role in organising such interaction. Unfortunately, the majority of college teachers are ill-equipped for switching from the functional and role-based interaction to person-centred one (Antipova, 2008; Bezyulyova, 2008; Bityanova & Beglova, 2010; Elizarov, 2007; Kodzhaspirova, 2016; Kolosov, Bobylev, & Kruchinin, 2007; Tyrsikova, 2012; Zhdanova, 2007).

## Findings

Various methods were used in the experimental part of our research. Below is a summary of psychological defences and coping strategies in overcoming difficulties employed by respondents at the stage of adaptation. The method offered by Heim made it possible to analyse 26 situation-specific coping behaviours distributed in accordance with three main mental spheres: cognitive, emotional and behavioural coping mechanisms. The method was tested in the clinical psychology laboratory at Saint Petersburg Bekhterev Psychoneurological Institute under the supervision of Prof. Vasserman, Doctor of Medical Sciences.

The total number of respondents was 153, which makes 100% of the sample. The research results are provided in the figures below.

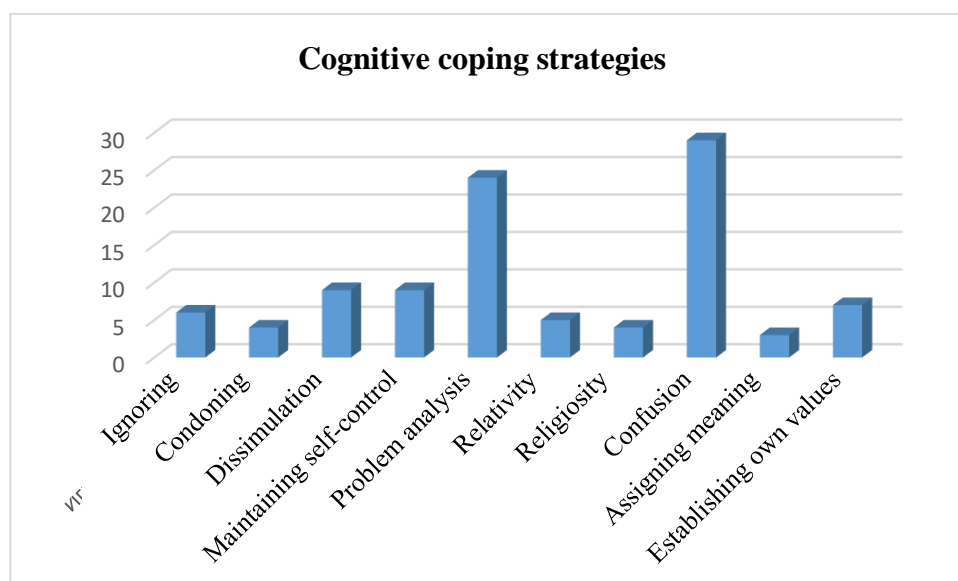


Fig. 1. Share of cognitive coping strategies in the student stratum

*Adaptive* coping behaviours of students, including ‘problem analysis’ (24%), ‘establishing own values’ (7%), and ‘maintaining self-control’ (9%), are behaviours aimed at analysing the difficulties that occurred in learning and finding possible ways out of them, improving the self-esteem and self-control, deeper understanding of one’s own value as a student, belief in one’s own resources and the ability to handle hard learning situations.

*Non-adaptive* coping behaviours of students.

Cognitive coping strategies of this type include ‘condoning’ (4%), ‘confusion’ (29%), ‘dissimulation’ (9%), ‘ignoring’ (6%). These are passive behaviours associated with refusing to overcome the difficulties due to the lack of confidence in one’s own strength and intellectual resources coupled with deliberate underestimation of troubles.

*Relatively adaptive* coping behaviours. Constructiveness depends on how significant and severe

the situation is where stress needs to be overcome. Among cognitive coping strategies, relatively adaptive coping behaviours include ‘relativity’ (5%), ‘assigning meaning’ (3%), and ‘religiosity’ (4%). These are students’ behaviours aimed at assessing the difficulties of the learning process as compared to other difficulties assigning a special meaning to overcoming them, and belief in God when encountering challenges.

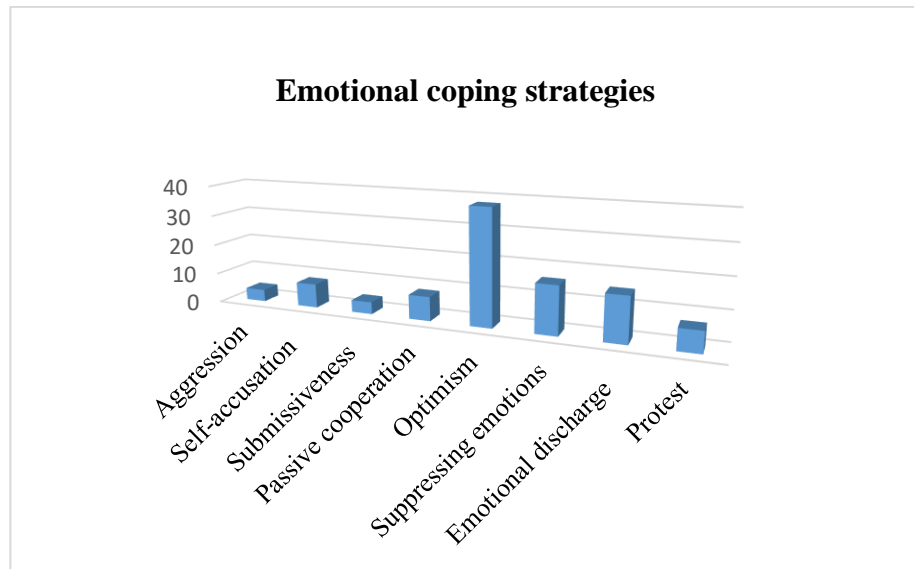


Fig. 2. Share of cognitive coping strategies in the student stratum

*Adaptive* coping behaviours in dealing with stressful situations include ‘protest’ (7%) and ‘optimism’ (38%). These connote an emotional state associated with active indignation about, and protest against, learning difficulties, as well as confidence in finding the way out even in the hardest situation that may occur during the learning process.

*Non-adaptive* coping behaviours among emotional coping strategies include ‘suppressing emotions’ (16%), ‘submissiveness’ (4%), ‘self-accusation’ (8%) and ‘aggression’ (4%). These are behaviours in studies-related stressful situations, which are characterised by suppression of the emotional state, a feeling of hopelessness, submissiveness and denial of other feelings, anger, accusation and blaming oneself and others: faculty, administration or peers.

*Relatively adaptive* behaviours among emotional coping strategies include ‘emotional discharge’ (15%) and ‘passive cooperation’ (8%). These behaviours are aimed either at relieving tension related to academic problems via emotional response to a stressful situation in the learning process or at shifting the responsibility for difficulties on other individuals: faculty, administration or peers.



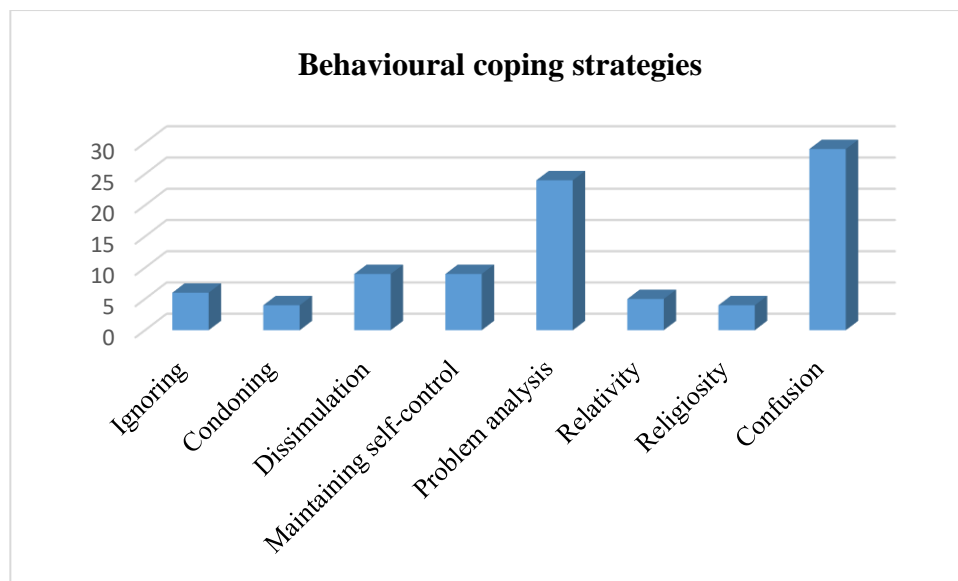


Fig. 3. Share of behavioural cognitive coping strategies in the student stratum

*Adaptive* coping behaviours. Behavioural coping strategies include ‘cooperation’ (15%), ‘reaching out’ (14%), and ‘altruism’ (6%). These are behaviours of students in a stressful situation during studies whereby they start to cooperate with significant (more experienced) people, look for support in the closest social environment of a university department: faculty, administration or peers.

*Non-adaptive* coping behaviours. Behavioural coping strategies of this type include ‘active avoidance’ (7%) and ‘retreat’ (19%). These are behaviours intended to avoid dwelling on academic problems associated with inactivity, opting for solitude, isolation, passive attitude, avoidance of interpersonal contacts with the faculty, administration or peers and refusal to address academic problems.

*Relatively adaptive* coping behaviours include ‘compensation’ (17%), ‘distraction’ (14%) and ‘constructive activity’ (8%). These students’ behaviours are characterised by a desire to shift away from their academic problems by drinking alcohol, taking medications, engaging in a hobby, travelling or fulfilling their cherished desires.

Thus, the primary behavioural strategies in stressful situations occurring in the course of studying are adaptive and relatively adaptive behaviours.

We compared the three main types of mental activities grouped by cognitive, emotional and behavioural coping mechanisms using Pearson’s criterion. The result is as follows:  $\chi^2_{Emp} = 13.142$ , which is more than  $\chi^2=9.488$  for  $p=0.05$ , but less than  $\chi^2=13.277$  for  $p=0.01$ . However, the differences between the distributed coping strategies are statistically significant.

To verify the validity of the data obtained, we used the statistical method of Fisher that makes it possible to check (identify) the validity of differences within the data obtained. This method was employed to check the validity of differences between the percentage shares of the sample parts, for which we registered the psychological effect in question. If the differences are not valid (an existing indicator is negative), then there are no (identified) differences between the individual parts of the whole sample by the feature in question.

The analysis based on the psycho-diagnostic method of Plutchik, Kellerman and Conte revealed that 41% of respondent students in the sample exhibit a projection of dominant replacement defence as their primary psychological defence, 21% show a projection of dominant tertiary defence, and 15% denial.

In their first year, two groups (MSUPE and MSPU) were taught by tutors with a prevailing student-centred approach in a number of subjects. The participating students of these groups demonstrated significant positive dynamics in their adaptation. Competing is resorted to by 51.7% of students as the key strategy to respond to conflicts with other subjects of the educational process, which is evidenced by its average indicator. Collaborating style of conflict resolution is preferred by 22% of respondents. Moreover, this strategy is used by 63% of students on a regular basis, which characterises the educational environment as a predominantly secure setting. Compromising is the primary strategy for 24.5% of respondents in handling interpersonal conflicts. 58% of students demonstrated average indicators of using this strategy in interpersonal conflicts, which is a psychologically positive factor. Avoidance proves to be the primary behavioural style in conflict situations for 9% of students. Average indicators for the Avoiding strategy were demonstrated by 49.2% of respondents, which is close to neutral. Accommodating is the primary style of conflict resolution for 9% of respondents. The primary (frequently used) strategy is opted for by 44% of students, while 47% of respondents only use this strategy occasionally.

### Conclusion

Evidently, it is not possible to cover all aspects of the problem we have touched upon within one paper. However, the results described above strongly suggest that the adaptation of first-year students was, is and indeed will be an urgent issue in university practice. Students encounter numerous difficulties and risks in their first year of studies, which tend to get even more complicated due to an ongoing full-scale transformation of the entire higher education system in Russia. Identifying such challenges, analysing and understanding their nature and ways of handling them, as well as creating secure (to a possible extent) psychological and pedagogical educational environment are the priority in designing and implementing a programme of psychological and pedagogical support of first-year students, which will help prevent a significant dropout after the first exam session, forming psychological defence and behavioural coping strategies that will be essential to bolstering stress resistance and adaptability of students not only for the period of their studies, but in their further professional pursuits.

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