

Coping with work-related stress amongst junior police officers in Pretoria central police station: a qualitative approach



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ABSTRACT

Police work is a high-stress occupation that exposes officers to violence, threats, and traumatic events daily. These experiences can cause significant personal distress and negatively impact performance. To cope with these stressful events, police officers employ various strategies. This study examined the coping strategies used by junior police officers at Pretoria's central police station, using Lazarus and Folkman's coping model. A qualitative, descriptive design was used to explore the experiences of nine junior officers through individual interviews. The results showed that junior officers primarily used emotional coping strategies rather than avoidance strategies. The identified coping mechanisms included religion, socialisation, self-encouragement, motivation, work acceptance, and consultation with health professionals. The study recommends conducting longitudinal studies with larger samples across multiple police stations in Gauteng and among senior officers to further understand and support police officers' mental well-being.

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Introduction

Soltes et al. (2021) view police work as one of the most physically and psychologically dangerous occupations in the world. It is one of few occupations where an employee is continually required to face physical dangers and to put their life on the line (Chirico et al., 2019). Due to the nature of their work, police officers are continually exposed to incidents characterised by unpredictability and danger to their personal safety (Smith et al., 2020). They are often exposed to events such as witnessing the death of other officers, crimes taking place, robberies, war, shooting and accidents. These activities may have an impact on their occupational and psychosocial functioning and as a result, they may be at a high risk of developing a stress reaction (Gul & Delice, 2011).

In the context of socio-economic and political turmoil of the past thirty years and the major changes resulting from dissolution of apartheid as well as escalating incidence of crime and violence, South African police officers are also affected physically and psychologically by the demand of their work. According to Louw (2007), a total of 506 police officers committed suicide between 2000 and 2005, compared to 387 between 2009 and 2012. Even though the suicide rate among police officers has decreased, there is still concern regarding the alarming rate at which it occurs.

Gauteng Province experiences high levels of violence and crime escalation, involving the killing of police officers and civilians, hijackings, robberies and shootings. This has created an unusually dangerous environment for them to manage. According to SAPS Crime Statistics (2012/13), Pretoria Central Police Station is among the top stations regarding high volumes of crime reported cases. All these challenges create an increasingly challenging environment for the police officers as they are expected to deal with these cases daily, which leave them at the risk of developing work-related stress. Junior police officers experience these challenges as they are exposed to operational policing, dangerous and traumatic activities. They mostly execute their duties in the field and there are no studies in South Africa been conducted that focus on them specifically (de Greeff & Els, 2024). This study therefore intended to explore strategies utilised by junior police officers to cope with work-related stress in Pretoria central police station.

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Literature Review

Various researchers agreed that coping can be conceptualised as the behavioural and cognitive efforts used to manage, tolerate and reduce internal and external demands that are viewed as threatening or exceeding personal resources (Altay & Pal, 2023; Bardeel & Drago, 2021; Jiang & Deng, 2024). Marks (2024) as well as Zhylin et al. (2024) described coping as an individual's attempt to prevent, reduce or eliminate negative experiences. Xiaoli and Veloo (2024) view coping as the dynamic process that change according to the situation and the corresponding appraisal made by an individual. The process is highly personal because threats affect people in different ways. It therefore seems that individuals use inconsistent coping preferences that they apply in varied settings. Coping may be influenced by the nature of stressful events, resources that a person exhibits as well as those environmental resources available to them. Similar findings found in the western world occur as in South Africa. Because of their different personality characteristics, police officers employ various strategies to cope with work-related stress (Paterson, 2021). As a collective, numerous researchers (Birch, 2024; Cohen-Biton et al., 2024; Gibbons, 2024; Govender & Mabuza, 2021; Houghton et al., 2024; Maabela, 2015; Modula et al., 2024; Richter et al., 2013; Rothmann et al., 2011; Tull et al., 2020; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2024) insinuate that police officers cope with stress in their workplace through approach-focused coping (comprised of active coping, emotional support and turning to religion), problem-focused coping, relaxation, self-directedness, defence mechanisms, emotion-focused strategies such as self-blame, wishful thinking, seeking support from family and friends, socialisation with friends and colleagues, and engaging in sport activities and hobbies as well as maladaptive coping which includes alcohol and substance abuse and engaging in anti-social activities.

Apart from the above findings, Pluut and Wonders (2020) advise spending less time with colleagues outside the workplace and actively separating work life from home life as effective coping mechanisms. Tehran (2011) revealed seeking professional counselling to be among the strategies that police officers employ to cope with stress. Blumberg et al. (2019) cited healthy eating habits as a coping mechanism that police officers employ. Moreover, aloofness, authoritarianism, cynicism, depersonalisation, emotional detachment and suspiciousness were reported as coping strategies used by police officers. Sundaram and Kumaran (2012) found that waiting for the right time to do the job and thinking of how best one can handle problems are approaches that police officers follow to cope with work-related stress.

Gumani et al. (2013) reported the following coping strategies that police officers utilise when they are exposed to the effects of work-related stress caused in the work setting. Strategies include case experiential learning (advanced operational work experience, transformed investigation, learning from case experience), inspiration (self-encouragement and motivation in addition to work-related optimism), emotion expression (self-directed humour, situation-directed humour, crying), emotional regulation (emotional restraint), case management (case separation), operational work interest (police unit interest), personal development (media, academic study), self-nurturing (rest and play), sense of responsibility (police officer sense of duty and victim), situational management (traumatic situational control), situational tolerance (operational work acceptance and perseverance as well as accepting the court outcome), spiritual mechanisms (attending church services, individual as well as seeking supportive prayers), and vigilance (operational work experience preparedness, mixed operational work preparedness avoidance and operational work alertness). These researchers also indicated that these coping strategies can be used independently or jointly, depending on the complexity of the situation.

Rakshase (2014) reported that the level of coping differs significantly between constables and other ranks. This finding concurred with Paterson and Paterson (2021) who detected that constables and sergeants are more likely to utilise avoidance coping strategies compared to senior superintendents. This is because constables and sergeants are on operational level and are more exposed to hands-on work, while senior superintendents are often station managers in charge of functions. Paterson and Paterson (2021) also reported that, in terms of race, black officers use more avoidance coping strategies than white and coloured officers. Ola and Mathur (2016) revealed that male and female officers utilise different coping strategies to deal with work-related stress. Female officers rely much on constructive coping (e.g. talking to spouse, friends or relatives about the problem, planning action, following it and praying for guidance and strength) compared to male officers. Male officers were further reported to rely far less on spiritual guidance, consulting on spouse, other family members and friends to cope with stress.

Police officers apply coping strategies based on their knowledge regarding their preferences and their belief concerning the usefulness of their choices (Hine et al., 2019). The application thus varies in terms of the duration of those stressful encounters (Folkman, 2012). In terms of the general trends of coping strategies among police officers, some strategies are used more frequently than others. Within the SAPS, problem-focused coping is mostly used to deal with stress (Gumani et al., 2013; Paterson & Paterson, 2021). Sundaram and Kumaran (2012) reported active coping (a form of problem-focused coping) as the most frequently applied coping mechanism by police constables. Richter et al. (2013) revealed accepting responsibility and planful problem-solving as coping mechanisms. Also, added self-control among the strategies are frequently employed by police officers. Furthermore, Gumani et al. (2013), Richter et al. (2013) and Wassermann (2015) reported that the most employed emotion-focused coping strategies used by South African police officers include situation tolerance, sense of responsibility, reappraisal and seeking social support. Some strategies reported to be applied the least utilised include maladaptive strategies of behavioural and mental disengagement, denial, avoidance strategies (focusing on emotions, venting of emotions and escape avoidance) and distancing (Gumani et al., 2013; Richter et al., 2013; Xiaoli & Veloo, 2024).

The South African Police Service presents a unique environment to study coping strategies as it is confronted with elevating crime levels. In addition, police officers are not coping well, as is reflected in the reported rates of illness, medical boarding, decreased

levels of job satisfaction and performance as well as high levels of absenteeism and resignation (Paterson & Paterson, 2021; Rothmann & Agathagelou, 2000). Gumani et al. (2013) and Kayal (2004) added that the research available on coping amongst police officers focused on organisational context rather than on the specific coping methods they employ and the effects thereof on their operational work.

Theoretical framework

The Lazarus and Folkman model of coping has been selected in this study. This model provides a comprehensive explanation of the coping process, it also gives an opportunity to see what could seem familiar through a new and distinct perspective. The model was selected to explain how junior police officers cope with stress they experienced in their work setting. They were selected based on the perception that work-related stress and its coping are viewed as a multifaceted and vigorous system of transaction in their work setting (Anderson et al., 2022). The coping process consists of the components: emotion, cognitive appraisal and coping. Therefore, these components operate as a unit and its patterning reflects the quality and the intensity of the emotion. Within the police context, emotions result from how junior police officers view, interpret and explain the situation at work. The experience could either be positive or negative, depending on the stressor as well as how they associate it with their wellbeing. Furthermore, they evaluate two aspects of stressful situations they face through motivational relevance and motivational congruence. These help them to assess how important or what the impact of the situation is on their wellbeing, because there are some things that could be stressful but not to the extent to affect their work, such as a salary. When evaluating the congruence (consistency) of a situation towards their goals, employees experience different emotions when they view the situation as more consistent than inconsistent with their goals. Their emotions are then influenced by secondary appraisal. In this situation, they evaluate the resources and mechanisms they could use for coping.

They therefore engage in coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984: 141) viewed “coping as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding an individual’s resources”. These authors acknowledges that coping strategies which junior police officers use to cope with work related stress changes over time in response to situational context where it takes place. There are two forms of coping that junior police officers employ to cope with work-related stress, namely problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. With problem-focused coping, junior police officers look at the cause of the stressful situation in detail, find possible remedies and select the best one before applying it. An example of stressful situation would be issues of discrimination and unequal resource allocation among junior police officers in their respective workplaces. Furthermore, emotion-focused coping concerns regulating stressful emotional responses by changing the way distressful relationships with the environment are taken care of (as in alertness or evasion); the associated meaning of whatever is occurring, which also alleviates distress without genuine relationship being changed; and closing, which includes a further kind or barely intimidating reassessment. Emotional-focused coping strategies that junior police officers employ include socialisation, exercise, engagement in alcohol and drugs, spiritual support and social support as well as absenteeism from work.

Significance of the study

This study will contribute new information by describing how the junior police officers at the Pretoria Central Police Station cope with work-related stress. It is envisaged that the findings will assist the SAPS in the development of guidelines that can promote effective management of work-related stress amongst police officers. It will also serve as a guideline for the SAPS in the development and review of human resources and employee health policies and programmes. This may add value to the existing data and literature on work-related stress and coping strategies within the SAPS and highlight the importance of filling gaps on important aspects that require attention.

Research and methodology

Research design

A qualitative and descriptive research approach was adopted to give in-depth description of junior police officers lived experience about work-related stress (Babbie, 2020). A descriptive research design was used to contextualise junior police officers to describe their experiences, feelings and thoughts from their perspective without changing environment as a requirement for qualitative research.

Research setting

The study was conducted in Pretoria Central police station, which is situated in a central City of Tshwane Metropolitan district in Gauteng Province of South Africa. City of Tshwane comprised of about 2,921,500 people living in its borders which includes Blacks, Whites, Coloureds and Indian/Asian (Statistics South Africa, 2012). The central city of Tshwane also gets busy as it offers many essential services and tourism destinations. Therefore, many people near and far prefer the area due to availability of resources. Pretoria central police station is among 143 stations within the province, is easily accessible and services many permanent residents, foreigners and daily commuting citizens. The station was also considered among top fifty stations countrywide, with a high volume of reported serious crimes (SAPS Crime Statistics, 2012/13).

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who knew about and had experience with work-related stress. The sample was drawn from police officers in Pretoria central police station, within different areas of responsibility or units and they had the following characteristics: All participants were of black ethnic group, and they were recruited from different areas of responsibility. Four were occupying rank of constable, two were sergeants and three were warrant officers, male and female participants. Three participants were respectively Setswana and Sepedi speaking, two Tshivenda and one spoke Xitsonga. Participants were having 6 to 24 years of experience in the service, eight were married and only one was single. Participants' level of education varied from Grade 12 to a university degree and an age range of 31-49.

Data collection

The researcher scheduled appointments with respondents to conduct interviews at the Pretoria Central Police Station. Data were collected by means of semi-structured individual interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to express themselves in detail on the issues seemed to be complex and controversial without fear of being judged (Smith et al., 2020). Participants were interviewed in English or Sepedi. Sepedi was selected as it is one of the dominating spoken languages within the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality. Each interview thus lasted for 40-45 minutes.

Data analysis

Interviews conducted in Sepedi were translated into English by independent language expert that transcribed the audio data into textual data. The data were analysed using content thematic analysis and the following phases from Braun and Clarke (2006; 2023) were used: The researchers repeatedly read the transcripts to get an overall impression and idea of the different types of meaning regarding experiences of work-related stress. They further identified the commonalities underlying the textual data by rereading the transcription and unpacks the themes that surfaced, creating sub-categories and clusters of information that appeared. The surfaced themes were then grouped and named accordingly. Thematising and coding phases complement each other in practice and their activities are related. Therefore, these stages were repeated during analysis until the researchers became confident that the themes reflect the interview transcripts and there was no significant new insight appeared to emerge. This was also done to capture data which would have been missed during the original coding process. Lastly, the researchers reported back on the phenomenon that was described. The report was thus composed of a presentation of themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Ethical consideration

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from South African Police Services (SAPS) Gauteng Province. Ethical clearance was further obtained from Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University Research Ethics (SMUREC) to conduct the study. The researchers informed the participants of the purpose and procedures of the study after which individual consent forms were signed as a proof of junior police officers' willingness to participate in the study (Babbie & Edgerton, 2023). Privacy, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by protecting the identity of the participants, and the information they provided was handled in a confidential manner for the study purpose only. Participants were treated with great respect, they were entitled with the right to decide when, where, to whom and to what extent their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour should be revealed. Participants were also entitled to the right of self-determination which meant that they had the right to make their own decisions. They thus referred using codes. The participants were protected from any potential harm and were not forced to talk about issues that they found too sensitive to disclose (Arifin, 2018).

Ensuring trustworthiness of the study

To ensure the quality of data and findings in this study, the researchers used the framework of establishing trustworthiness, which is comprised of the following four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Creswell, 2024). Member checking, triangulation was used to ensure credibility of the study. Interviewing more participants until the researchers reaches data saturation was also used to ensure study credibility. The researchers described the research context and the assumptions that were central to the research as thoroughly as possible to address transferability. This allows anyone who might have an interest in transferring the results in a different context an onus of judging how sensible the transfer is (Ahmed, 2024). The researchers thus ensured dependability in this study by comprehensively explaining and documenting the methodology followed in the study, as well as the details of data gathering and analysis to provide future researchers with evidence against which they can verify their results. All sources that were used to give assurance, power and support to the ideas and arguments in the study were fully acknowledged. An audit trail was applied. The records of the transcribed interviews and audio recordings as well as analysis notes and how the conclusion was reached were kept. An audit trail allowed the researcher's colleagues and supervisors to confirm the accuracy of the research analysis against the data transcripts (Babbie, 2020).

Results and discussions

Junior police officers indicated that they employ different coping mechanisms to deal with work-related stress. They seemed to use more of the emotional coping strategy than the avoidance coping strategy. These coping mechanisms are discussed as themes. The

themes that the researchers identified were supported by the references to the literature review and theoretical orientation of this study to establish the discussion. The identified themes were religion, socialisation, self-encouragement, motivation, work acceptance, as well as consultation with health professionals.

Theme 1: Religion

Junior police officers in the study were of Christian faith. They indicated that even though they were Christian, they value cultural practices. Police officers indicated that their faith in God helps them to deal with challenges encountered at the workplace. They reported that they attend church services, listen to sermons, sharing experiences with other congregants and pray to God for strength and wisdom to deal with work challenges. Police officers shared that they believe God gives them the spiritual and physical healing they need. A forty-two-year-old male Constable shared that:

“My God keeps amazing me in this life. I attend church services and meetings as often as I get a chance to explore and share my experiences and everything bothering me... It is also by his grace that I am still able to work like other people, after all I have been through.”

Some police officers of cultural belief revealed that their reliance on their cultural practices assists them to cope with work challenges. They shared that they visit their traditional healers to regain strength and for cleansing after traumatic incidents whilst on the other hand they need the healers to protect from danger. A forty-eight-year-old male sergeant shared that

“I go to my traditional doctor more often to seek help and to check if there might be some challenges along the way, she helps me a lot...”

The findings in the study are supported by Paterson (2024) who reported that police officers' ability to connect to any form of religious acts is a meaningful coping mechanism in dealing with stress. Other researchers (Gumani, 2012; Gumani et al., 2013; Joubert & Grobler, 2013; Young et al., 2012) report that religion assists police officers to cope with work-related stress. Similarly, Gumani et al. (2013) and Maabela (2015) highlight that police officers engage in religious practices such as attending church and praying for deliverance as mechanisms to cope with work-related stress. Gumani (2012) added that police officers view engaging in religious practices as one of the important things to do in their lives. She also claimed that religion helps the officers to achieve strength and self-sufficiency in coping with work-related stress. She also highlighted that culture has an immense influence on coping with work-related stress. Thus, individuals from different backgrounds respond differently to stress due to their cultural emphasis. Birch (2024) alluded that cultural practices provide the emotional strength and resilience needed to cope with work-related stress. The above findings are in support of the research findings of this study as participants indicated that they use their religious and cultural practices to cope with stress encountered at work. Since those believing in Christianity believe that God will strengthen them, whilst those who believe in cultural practices such as visiting traditional healers rely on these practices for strength and resilience.

Theme 2: Socialisation

All junior police officers emphasised socialisation as a mechanism they resort to for dealing with work-related stress. Police officers revealed that they socialise by engaging in hobbies and recreational activities, which include different sports, gym, choral music and social clubs. They indicated that engaging activities assists them in getting close to other people out of the work environment. Some of the pleasant and relaxing activities police officers engage on to deal with work-related stress includes travelling, going out to watch a movie, clubbing, shopping, reading books, listening to their favourite music. Other few officers added that they resort to drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco, and they believe substances repress the effects caused by the challenges they encounter at work. Thirty-six- and thirty-eight-year-old male sergeants reported that:

“I play with a soccer team here at work, but I'll leave it soon ... I also keep myself busy with music ... I'm a member of SAPS choir.”

“I smoke on a daily basis but I think when I'm stressed, I smoke a lot... they even know at home.”

The findings of this study are supported by Maabela (2015) who reported that police officers engage in hobbies as mechanisms to cope with health and social effects associated with work-related stress. Maabela stated these hobbies include partaking in sports activities, physical exercises, social and family events, watching movies, shopping, reading books and listening to favourite music. Similarly, Gumani (2012), Mabe (2004) and Sekwena et al. (2007) supported the findings of engaging in hobbies and recreational activities as a coping strategy. The researchers reported that actively participating in hobbies acted as an effective coping mechanism that promotes officers' mental and physical wellness. Boshoff et al. (2015) added that hobbies help officers to find and maintain psycho-social wellbeing.

Gumani (2012) reported that participating in satisfying and soothing activities helps police officers to recover from work-related stress experienced. These activities assist them in regaining their strength to handle new challenges that will come their way later. The findings of the study on the usage of alcohol and drugs (cigarettes) were supported by numerous researchers (Lynch, 2007; Paterson & Paterson, 2021) who found that the abuse of alcohol and drugs was common among the SAPS organisation to deal with trauma and stress-related effects. Police officers use these to avoid and repress the effects of work-related stress such as anger,

sadness, fear, loneliness, frustration and distrust (Lynch, 2007; Madu & Poodhun, 2006; Young et al., 2012). The above discussed literature supports the finding reported by police officers in this study.

Theme 3: Self-encouragement, motivation and acceptance

Most junior police officers indicated that despite the stressful and traumatic nature of their job, they continue to motivate and encourage themselves towards their work. They indicated that they have also accepted the nature of their work. Most of them indicated that stressful work tasks that are completed serve as a strategy that motivates and inspire them to remain positive towards their work. They also revealed that seeing themselves as dutiful public servants in ensuring a safe and crime-free society comforts them and revives their strengths to work hard and deal with work-related stress better. Thirty-six-year-old female constable and forty-nine-year-old male warrant officer expressed that:

“Things come across in this environment that motivates me to work more every day... I know one day I’ll be gone but my legacy will remain.”

“Even though being an officer can be difficult, curbing crime in the neighbourhood encourages me to work very hard...”

Most police officers further indicated that they have accepted the nature of their work and are therefore finding ways to help them cope with work-related stress. Whilst few police officers revealed that they feel trapped in the work but do not have any other choice. Thirty-eight-year-old male sergeant revealed that:

“I have accepted that as long as I’m still a police officer I’ll have to attend to those serious complaints; I’m trained to work on it.”

The findings of the study are supported by other researchers (Gumani, 2012; Gumani et al., 2013) who reported that police officers motivate and encourage themselves in their work. The researchers indicated that during stressful operations they get inspired to ensure that perpetrators face the consequences for their actions. It also encourages them to focus on achieving that goal. Their goal outweighs the stress experienced. This supports the findings of this study on how police officers motivate and encourage themselves regarding work-related stress. Maabela (2015), who reported that some police officers cope with the effects of work-related stress by telling themselves that they are obliged to serve in the police service and thus persevere in their work, despite the hardships, for the sake of their families. Similar findings were also reported by Gumani (2012) and Gumani et al. (2013) who further indicated that police officers cope with work-related stress by accepting the nature of their work. The above-mentioned researchers indicated that police officers feel obliged to do their work and thus persevere despite the hardships experienced for the subsistence of their families. This also supports the findings of this study.

Theme 4: Consultation with health professionals

Junior officers reported that they consult with various health professions on a regular basis because of challenges and the effects thereof which they encountered at work. Health professionals the junior officers mostly visit include general practitioners, physiotherapists, psychologists or counsellors and social workers. These officers revealed that they are likely to use external service providers because they offer them an opportunity to express their feelings, experiences and challenges they encounter because of their work without having the fear of being judged. Thirty-six-year-old male sergeant shared that:

“The physiotherapist at Louis Pasteur Hospital is the one who advised me to visit a psychologist after he saw the symptoms of depression because of headaches that were giving me a tough time ... He helped me; even now, I do contact him and we share views and get solutions even to my personal problems.”

Police officers acknowledged that there is an Employee Health and Wellness (EHW) unit within the SAPS. However, most of them highlighted that they do not prefer to consult internally due to the lack of confidentiality and because they had been trained to avoid showing emotions. Thirty-six-year-old female constable also shared that:

“We always hear some other colleague’s personal information roaming around corridors, so what’s going to happen with my problems... some colleagues are too judgemental. The worst part is that rumours are heard, and one is not sure of its reliability...”

The findings of this study were supported by Gumani (2012) and Maabela (2015) who reported that using professional counselling from both the EHW unit and externally enables effective coping with trauma associated with work-related stress among police officers. Tehrani (2011) also found that obtaining confidential personal support from occupational health professionals or counsellors to deal with both work and family issues helps to cope with the effects of trauma and work-related stress. Boshoff et al. (2015) highlighted that because of their unique culture, police officers are not allowed to display any signs of emotion. Blais and Renshaw (2013) found that some police officers prefer not to talk or seek help as confidentiality is not maintained. Davidson et al. (2023) added that police officers do not consult, out of fear to be seen as weak. However, the evidence from these researchers confirms the findings reported by the police officers in this study.

Implication for application

The identifiable implications for practice of this study which occur either directly or indirectly, are *avoidance coping strategies, continuous support, emotional coping strategies, employee assistance programs, employee feedback, employee well-being, leadership support, managerial support, mental health awareness, religious coping, self-encouragement, social support, stress management training, work acceptance, and work-life balance*, and. These can be unpacked briefly as follows:

Avoidance Coping Strategies: Avoidance coping strategies are less commonly used by junior police officers, indicating the need for more proactive approaches to stress management. However, when necessary and not detrimental, they can sparingly apply these strategies to alleviate possible adverse mental outcomes.

Continuous Support: Providing continuous support and resources to junior police officers can help them develop effective coping mechanisms and maintain their mental well-being over time.

Emotional Coping Strategies: Junior police officers could employ or be assisted to employ emotional coping strategies to manage work-related stress, which highlights the importance of emotional intelligence and self-awareness in the workplace.

Employee Assistance Programs: Implementing employee assistance programs (EAPs) that offer counselling and other support services can help junior police officers access the resources they need to manage stress effectively.

Employee Feedback: Regular employee feedback and surveys can help identify areas where stress management support is needed and inform the development of effective coping strategies.

Employee Well-being: The findings underscore the importance of prioritising employee well-being and providing resources to support mental health and stress management, and the police service system may enforce psychological and social work services to take care of stressed police officers, especially the junior ones.

Leadership Support: Leaders should demonstrate a commitment to employee well-being and provide a supportive environment that encourages open communication and stress management.

Managerial Support: Managers should be trained to recognise and support the coping mechanisms used by junior police officers, ensuring that employees feel supported and understood.

Mental Health Awareness: Raising mental health awareness and reducing stigma around mental health issues can help junior police officers feel more comfortable seeking support.

Religious Coping: The theme of religion as a coping mechanism suggests that spiritual support systems can be beneficial in managing stress, and employers could consider providing access to spiritual resources.

Self-Encouragement: Self-encouragement and motivation are essential for junior police officers to manage stress effectively, and employers could foster a culture that promotes self-confidence and motivation.

Social Support: Socialisation and consultation with health professionals are also identified as coping mechanisms, emphasising the value of social support networks in reducing stress.

Stress Management Training: Providing stress management training that incorporates emotional coping strategies and social support networks can help junior police officers better manage work-related stress.

Work Acceptance: Work acceptance is another theme that highlights the importance of job satisfaction and the need for employers to create a positive work environment.

Work-Life Balance: Encouraging work-life balance and flexible work arrangements can help reduce stress and improve overall well-being.

Limitations of the study

This study was limited in several ways. It was conducted using a non-probability (purposive) sampling method that involved only a small sample of participants. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to a broader population of police officers within different stations in South Africa. The scope of the study was also limited because only police officers at junior level were included. The sample consisted of mainly male participants and only a few female officers. Furthermore, it was comprised of only African officers. This might raise questions about possible sex, racial and rank differences in relation to experiences of work-related stress.

Conclusion

The study investigated into the coping strategies employed by junior police officers stress in Pretoria central police station to cope with work-related. The results of the study revealed that the coping strategies that the junior police officers tend to use were centred on emotional coping strategy than the avoidance coping strategy. Considering the context of the officer's work, the study uncovered religion, socialisation, self-encouragement, motivation, work acceptance, and consultation with health professionals as mechanisms that junior police officers use to cope with work-related stress. The study recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted with large samples on several police stations in Gauteng as well as amongst police officers within senior ranks. It is recommended that

the SAPS should implement strategies to assist with managing stress in their workplace. This can be through instituting regular workshops and training on stress and its management to all police officers. They also need to raise awareness amongst their members and encourage them to use the internal Employee Health and Wellness services.

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Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

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