



Coping Strategies and Psychological Resilience Among University Students with Trauma Histories: A Narrative Review

Gian Derick J. Sevilla

Counseling and Psychological Services, De La Salle University, Manila, Metro Manila, 1004, Philippines

✉ gian.sevilla@dlsu.edu.ph

RESEARCH ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Received: March 04, 2026 Reviewed: May 21, 2026 Accepted: June 22, 2026 Published: June 30, 2026  Copyright © 2025 by the Author(s). This open-access article is distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.	University students with trauma histories represent a vulnerable population as they navigate complex developmental transitions alongside significant stressors. While existing research often focuses on the general adult population, this narrative review examined how current theoretical models of resilience and coping explain the specific pathways through which university students navigate trauma-related adversities. Following a multi-database search of Scopus, PubMed, and PsycINFO for literature published from 2015 to 2025, 26 peer-reviewed articles were identified for full-text evaluation. Ultimately, 14 empirical studies were selected for a qualitative interpretative synthesis. The compiled literature was organized into four themes: resilience as a mediating buffer, adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, cognitive reconstruction and the sequential mechanism of growth, and socio-ecological influences and demographic vulnerabilities. The findings revealed that successful trauma navigation is not a linear return to baseline functioning but is a process of meaning-making. Central to this process is a “growth chain” wherein adaptive appraisal and positive coping facilitate resilience, which in turn drives the deliberate rumination necessary for post-traumatic growth. Conversely, the review also identified “impairment chains” where distal trauma acts as a latent vulnerability, sensitizing students to current academic and social crises. These insights inform university mental health policy towards strength-based, trauma-informed frameworks.

Keywords: *coping strategies, resilience, university students, post-traumatic growth, trauma-informed pedagogy*

Introduction

University students represent a population in a critical developmental stage, often balancing academic demands with personal and social challenges. For students with trauma histories, these stressors are compounded, which increases the risk for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, academic disengagement, and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Hatta et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025; Baynar & Cantor, 2004). However, it must be noted that not all students succumb to these challenges. A significant body of research highlighted the role of coping strategies and psychological resilience in helping students navigate through trauma-related adversities (Connor & Davidson, 2003).

Coping strategies are methods in which individuals use to manage stress and trauma. These strategies have also been observed in the Filipino context, in which coping strategies are closely intertwined with social support systems in facilitating adaptation to adversity (Dela Cruz et al., 2024). These can be categorized into positive (adaptive) and negative (maladaptive) strategies (Chaaya et al., 2025). Related constructs such as self-regulation further explain how students manage academic and psychological stress, with evidence indicating that effective regulation is associated with better functioning and adjustment outcomes (Alejandro, 2024). Adaptive coping strategies include problem-solving, seeking social support, and positive re-evaluation, which are associated with better mental health outcomes (Florez de Alvis et al., 2020). In contrast to this, maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, denial, and behavioral disengagement, are associated with exacerbated symptoms and impaired functioning (Yang et al., 2024; Florez de Alvis, 2020). The use of effective coping strategies, therefore, is considered a crucial factor in how individuals process and respond to trauma.

In addition to the role of coping, psychological resilience refers to the ability of individuals to adapt and recover from adversity, trauma, and significant stress. It is not a fixed trait but a process shaped by a combination of personal attributes and environmental factors such as emotional intelligence, social support, and coping flexibility (Bulathwatta & Witruk, 2019). It must be noted that research consistently shows that individuals with higher levels of resilience tend to exhibit lower levels of depression and anxiety, alongside better overall psychological well-being, even in the aftermath of traumatic stress (Primasari et al., 2022; Pan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, emerging evidence highlights the relationship between coping strategies and resilience, in which adaptive coping fosters resilience by enhancing psychological flexibility and resourcefulness, while resilient individuals are more inclined to engage in adaptive coping behaviors (Hou et al., 2024; Li & Hu, 2022; Wu et al., 2020). Theoretical models such as the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984) and the Rutter Model of Development (Rutter, 2006, 2012) suggest that this relationship may function as a “serial mediation” or a chain of events that facilitates a student’s navigation through trauma. In addition to this, interventions that target both coping and resilience have been shown to significantly reduce trauma-related symptoms and enhance student well-being (Hatta et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2025; Wu et al., 2020).

While there is an increasing body of research on coping strategies and resilience, much of the existing literature focuses on general adults or clinical populations with limited attention to university students navigating trauma within academic environments (Baynard & Cantor, 2004; Bulathwatta & Witruk, 2019). Studies that do examine student populations often address stress and coping in the context of academic pressures rather than trauma-specific adversities. Given the rising prevalence of trauma-related distress among students and the critical need for responsive mental health strategies in academic institutions, a comprehensive review examining coping mechanisms and resilience factors is both timely and necessary. Addressing these gaps is essential to inform effective, trauma-informed interventions tailored to university students.

The primary aim of the present study, therefore, was to provide a narrative review of the role of coping and resilience among university students with trauma histories. Specifically, it illustrated how current theoretical models of resilience and coping explain how university students navigate trauma.

Methods

The study utilized a narrative literature review in order to examine how university students with trauma histories navigate trauma. This review summarized, integrated, and critically analyzed existing research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the topic. As such, the design allowed for flexibility in study selection and synthesis methods (Ferrari, 2015).

A comprehensive search of reputable academic databases was conducted in October of 2025 to identify relevant peer-reviewed articles from Scopus, PubMed, & PsycINFO. The search was performed using a combination of keywords and phrases connected by Boolean operators to refine the results. The search string combination included the following: (“coping strategies” OR “coping mechanisms” OR “coping styles”) AND (“psychological resilience” OR “resilience”) AND (“university students” OR “college students” OR “higher education students”) AND (“trauma” OR “trauma histories” OR “PTSD”).

The literature selection was guided by specific criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the included studies. The inclusion criteria included: (1) empirical studies which focused on higher education students, (2) studies must primarily focus on coping mechanisms and/ or psychological resilience among undergraduate university students with trauma histories, (3) studies may include descriptions of interventions, recommendations, and programs specifically aimed at addressing psychological trauma among undergraduate students from local or international populations, (4) studies must have been published within the past 10 years (2015–2025), and (5) studies must be open-access, peer-reviewed journal articles fully available online written in English.

On the other hand, studies were excluded from the review if: (1) the focus is exclusively on populations other than undergraduate university students with trauma histories, (2) the focus of trauma is other than psychological trauma, (3) not a journal article, (4) a restricted- or subscription-access, (5) grey literature, (6) studies not available in English, or (7) studies published outside the 10-year period.

The initial database search and screening yielded 26 peer-reviewed empirical articles that were fully downloaded. Following a secondary round of screening, 21 articles were accepted, leaving a final total of 14 studies utilized for the synthesis of literature. Quality control was managed upstream by restricting the search exclusively to peer-reviewed empirical studies in indexed databases.

Thematic analysis was utilized to synthesize the literature. Patterns were analyzed, identified, and reported into themes within the included articles by implementing a three-stage coding process: (1) line-by-line initial coding, (2) conceptual clustering of categories, and (3) final thematic integration. The analysis specifically focused on the interplay between coping mechanisms and resilience among university students with trauma histories, as well as the application of current theoretical models to these phenomena.

Ethical Considerations

The study did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants or the utilization of any identifiable personal information. Despite this, ethical clearance was sought from the DLSU Research Ethics Office. To ensure adherence to ethical standards, proper citation and acknowledgement of all sources, accurate representation of the author's findings, and avoidance of plagiarism were observed. In addition to this, efforts were made to fairly interpret the literature without misrepresentation or bias.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this narrative literature review highlight 14 articles for the synthesis of literature. To provide a comprehensive breakdown, the author and year, country and context, sample size and demographics, trauma types evaluated, and key findings were included in Table 1.

Table 1. Information on Included Studies

Author & Year	Country & Context	Sample Size & Demographics	Trauma Types Evaluated	Key Findings
Cao et al. (2022)	China: General university setting.	N=740; 68.5% female; freshmen to seniors.	Childhood maltreatment (abuse and neglect before age 16).	Childhood maltreatment significantly predicts mental health symptomology; resilience and coping styles act as partial chain mediators that mitigate this distal impact.
Chudzicka-Czupala et al. (2025)	Poland and Ukraine: Cross-national comparison during active conflict.	N=1286 (659 Polish, 627 Ukrainian); 71.6% female.	Russo-Ukrainian War (direct conflict threats and migration crisis).	Polish students reported higher depression/stress than Ukrainians. Avoidant coping was linked to higher distress, while problem-focused coping served as a protective factor.
El Zouki et al. (2022)	Lebanon: Students facing cumulative national disasters.	N=419; 70.4% female; mean age, 21.02	Beirut port blast, national economic crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic.	High PTSD rates (40.3% from the economic crisis), avoidant coping, and anxiety were the strongest predictors of symptom severity across trauma types.
Hao et al. (2023)	China: Student volunteers in COVID-19 control.	N=2990	Frontline trauma exposure from pandemic volunteer work.	Social support and positive coping positively predicted post-traumatic growth (PTG).

Hao et al. (2025)	China: College students during acute COVID-19 outbreaks.	N=545; 70.83% female; 53.03% urban respondents.	Collective stress from the pervasive COVID-19 pandemic.	Negative coping was the primary predictor of PTSD severity. Online social support facilitates PTG via a sequential mediation chain: support → gratitude → cognitive reappraisal → PTG.
Li et al. (2023)	China: College students in the aftermath of COVID-19.	N=463; 78.83% female; 20.5% medical students.	Multifaceted pressures (academic, economic, lifestyle) from the pandemic.	Positive coping predicts PTG directly and indirectly via psychological resilience and deliberate rumination. Serial mediation found: PC → CR → PR/DR → PTG.
Machado et al. (2020)	Brazil: Non-clinical undergraduates with trauma exposure.	N=37; participants fulfilling Criterion A of the DSM-IV PTSD diagnostic criteria.	Life-threatening events (death of a relative, sexual violence, accidents).	Dysfunctional coping was the only consistent predictor of PTSD symptoms. Emotion-focused coping was associated with lower symptom severity.
Straup et al. (2024)	United States: Early pandemic during the stay-at-home phase in Texas.	N=222; 81.5% female; ethnically diverse sample.	COVID-19 pandemic impacts (infection fear, isolation, disrupted learning).	Acceptance and social support were most common. Avoidant coping linked significantly to more intrusive thoughts and hyperarousal than helpful coping strategies.
Sujadi et al. (2023)	Indonesia: Female students reporting campus violence	N=170 female students	Sexual harassment (verbal and physical) by lecturers, staff, or peers	Social support improves PTSD via resilience and positive religious coping. Positive religious coping (finding meaning) reduces negative symptoms and correlates negatively with stress.
Sun et al. (2024)	China: Intern nursing students after COVID-19 liberalization	N=438; 76.5% female; 50.9% rural respondents	Occupational exposure and direct care of COVID-19 patients	PTSD risk was strongly associated with heightened fear of COVID-19.
Van der Hallen & Godor (2022)	The Netherlands: university students in a longitudinal study	N=70; 87% female; 65% Dutch	COVID-19 “mass trauma” (outbreak and lockdown restrictions)	Moderate PTG was reported by participants. Positive affect and social skills were identified as the strongest longitudinal predictors of growth.
Xu et al. (2024)	China: College students during lockdowns	N=881; 64% female	Existential crisis from the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic	Resilience affects PTG directly and indirectly via negative emotions. Deliberate

				rumination (constructive coping) moderates how resilience facilitates growth.
Yang et al., (2024)	China; college students	N=376	Childhood trauma (abuse, neglect, family dysfunction before age 18)	Childhood trauma significantly predicts depression. Subjective well-being mediates the link, while resilience moderates well- being's protective factor.
Zeng et al. (2023)	China: home- quarantined college students	N=12397	COVID-19 impact and past stressful events (abuse, disaster, accidents)	Past stressful events mediated (increased) PTSD risk. Psychological resilience and social support served as protective negative mediators.

Resilience as a Mediating Buffer

The current literature consistently frames resilience not as a static trait, but as something that can be cultivated and functions as a buffer between traumatic exposure and mental health outcomes (Cao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2024). The synthesized data from the reviewed literature indicate that higher levels of resilience are significantly associated with decreased symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety across varied contexts, including childhood maltreatment and pandemic-related isolation (Sujadi et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024).

Theoretically, this aligns with the Rutter Model of Development, which posits that resilience functions by mitigating the devastating impact of risk factors while offering new opportunities for positive adjustment. Furthermore, resilience serves as a potent moderator; for instance, as resilience level increases, the predictive power of subjective well-being in reducing depressive symptoms is substantially enhanced (Yang et al., 2024). This suggests that navigating trauma effectively depends on the activation of internal “tenacity” and “optimism” to disarm the potential “latent time bombs” of historical trauma (Cao et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2024).

Adaptive vs Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a framework for understanding how students' navigation is dictated by their appraisal of a stressor and the subsequent strategy they select (Chudzicka-Czupala et al., 2025; Straup et al., 2024). Findings revealed that avoidant and dysfunctional coping styles such as denial, self-blame, and behavioral disengagement are the strongest predictors of severe PTSD symptoms and psychological distress (El Zouki et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023). Conversely, taking proactive and goal-oriented steps in addressing stress has been found to be associated with better adjustment, academic retention, and higher resilience (El Zouki et al., 2022; Machado et al., 2020; Straup et al., 2024). Within religious populations, students may navigate uncontrollable events by finding “higher meaning” through positive religious coping, which has been shown to significantly reduce PTSD symptoms (Sujadi et al., 2023). These results highlighted the importance of “goodness of fit,” where effective trauma navigation requires students to flexibly match

their coping strategies to the appraised controllability of the traumatic event (Straup et al., 2024).

Cognitive Reconstruction and the Sequential Mechanism of Growth

Navigating trauma often involves transformations known as Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), where students achieve a level of functioning higher than their pre-trauma state through a process of cognitive struggle (Li et al., 2023; Van der Hallen & Godor, 2022). Theoretical models, such as the Organismic Valuing Theory, suggest that traumatic incidents force a rupture in “meaning-making”, compelling students to reconstruct their life narratives (Li et al., 2023).

A crucial determinant in this navigation is the shift from intrusive thoughts to deliberate rumination, a constructive cognitive process where students consciously process memories to find solutions and meaning (Li et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024). This process is rarely isolated, and instead, it exists within an integrative serial mediation pathway, specifically, when positive coping styles lead to cognitive reappraisal, which facilitates resilience and deliberate rumination, eventually driving PTG (Hao et al., 2025; Li et al., 2023).

Understanding these “growth chains” sheds light to navigation as a sequential trajectory. However, it must be noted that the same process reveals an “impairment chain” where distal trauma, such as childhood maltreatment, impairs current coping styles, thereby reducing resilience and increasing vulnerability to PTSD during new crises (Cao et al., 2022; Zeng et al., 2023). By viewing these variables as an interconnected chain, practitioners can better identify where students’ navigation has stalled, whether at the point of the initial appraisal or during the secondary stage of meaning-making. Ultimately, positive affect and social skills serve as the strongest predictors of long-term growth, broadening a student’s cognitive range and building lasting psychological resources for recovery (Hao et al., 2025).

Socio-Ecological Influences and Demographic Vulnerabilities

Navigation is not purely an internal effort; it is deeply situated in the student’s socio-ecological environment and demographic background (Cao et al., 2022). Research highlights that women and those of poor financial status are more at risk of higher levels of distress and PTSD symptoms (Chudzicka-Czupala et al., 2025; El Zouki et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Social support from family, peers, and online networks also acts as a critical compensatory mechanism that buffers negative psychological responses and facilitates the transition towards growth (Hao et al., 2023; Zeng et al., 2023). During periods of physical isolation, online social support has emerged as a key source of resilience, facilitating PTG by enhancing gratitude and stimulating cognitive reappraisal (Hao et al., 2025). These findings suggest that universities must implement gender-sensitive and financially supportive interventions to assist vulnerable student populations navigating trauma (Chudzicka-Czupala et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Future Works

The narrative review aimed to explain how current theoretical models of resilience and coping explain the pathways through which university students navigate trauma. By synthesizing diverse literature, this review revealed that trauma navigation is not merely the absence of pathology but is a process shaped by an individual’s appraisal of stressors, their internal resilience buffers, and the socio-ecological scaffolding available to them.

The evidence highlights that university students exposed to adversity, whether through childhood maltreatment, sexual harassment, pandemic-related stressors, or active conflict, have demonstrated varied coping capabilities that have significantly dictated their long-term recovery. Adaptive mechanisms, such as problem-solving and positive re-evaluation, are consistently linked to reduced distress, while maladaptive behaviors like avoidance and self-blame reinforce “impairment chains” that aggravate PTSD severity and academic disengagement. Central to trauma navigation is this transition from intrusive distress to deliberate rumination, facilitating PTG.

Ultimately, these theoretical models inform a necessary shift in perspective where university students with trauma histories should be recognized as individuals engaged in their own complex and reconstructive effort. To effectively support this trauma navigation, universities must move beyond general mental health services and towards trauma-informed pedagogy and strengths-based counseling. Specifically, institutions should implement structured, stigma-free mental health screening protocols during student onboarding and establish transparent, campus-wide counseling referral pathways. Furthermore, universities must mandate trauma-informed training for faculty and staff alongside dedicated, gender-sensitive mental health support services. By implementing these targeted interventions, universities can provide the support necessary to transform these vulnerabilities into “growth chains”.

Moving forward, future empirical research should prioritize longitudinal designs to track how these structural “growth chains” evolve across diverse student cohorts. Additionally, investigators should explicitly evaluate the efficacy of campus-wide, trauma-informed programs to determine which specific institutional interventions most effectively disrupt latent “impairment chains” in higher education settings.

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Acknowledgment

The author expresses his gratitude to his colleagues and friends at the De La Salle University Counseling and Psychological Services Office for their support throughout the development of this article.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Declaration Statement

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the writing of the paper. The author used Gemini to support the drafting and editing of this paper, including clarity, grammar, and overall readability. Additionally, NotebookLM was used to organize, sort, and manage the literature and references included in this study. All outputs generated by these tools were reviewed and edited by the author to ensure accuracy, relevance, and originality.