



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Stress Level and Coping Strategies of Students with Disabilities at Hasanuddin University

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ABSTRACT

Not all universities in Indonesia are ready to launch inclusive education programs. Inclusivity is not merely to ensure the acceptance of students with disabilities into educational institutions. Instead, it must provide the support mechanisms to respond to specific situations. This study aims to analyze the stress levels and coping strategies of students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. It used a qualitative approach with 17 participants: 10 participants were students with disabilities, two participants were volunteers, two participants were lecturers and three participants were staff of disability center. This study was conducted at Hasanuddin University in Makassar from September to November 2024. Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis. The result of this study showed that the majority of students with disabilities experience moderate levels of stress. Various stressors cause their stress, including internal factors (social and psychological barriers), external factors (physical accessibility and limitations in campus policies), and academic factors (obstacles in the learning process). In facing the challenges, they engaged problem-focused coping by using assistive devices, seeking alternative solutions, and asking for help. Some students with disabilities also cope with stress by managing emotional responses and controlling their thoughts through positive affirmation towards the challenges they face.

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INTRODUCTION

Disability is a social issue that remains a global problem. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that more than 1.3 billion people, or about 16% of the world's population, experience various forms of disability [1]. The Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities defines disability as any individual who experiences physical, intellectual, mental, and/or sensory limitations for an extended period, and who may face barriers and difficulties in fully and effectively participating with other citizens based on equal rights [2]. The Ministry of Social Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia reported in 2022 that the number of people with disabilities in Indonesia reached 16.5 million, comprising 7.6 million males and 8.9 million females. The Riskesdas study states that South Sulawesi ranks third among provinces with the highest number of people with disabilities in Indonesia, at 33.6% [3]. The city of Makassar is the area in South Sulawesi with the highest number of people with disabilities [4].

In the literature on disability, there are two dominant perspectives: the medical model and the social model. The medical model views disability as a medical problem resulting from the loss or reduction of an individual's sensory, physical, and mental functions. According to this perspective, a person with a disability needs to have their functions improved through rehabilitation or treatment [5]. This model is subsequently challenged by the social model, proposed by Oliver (1990), which distinguishes between impairment and disability. According to this perspective, a person is not deemed disabled due to their physical, sensory, or mental limitations; rather, they are considered disabled due to a social environment that obstructs their limitations from being optimized [6].

According to the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Indonesia in 2020, the highest level of education among persons with disabilities is not completing elementary school (SD), which accounts for 29.35%. Additionally, 9.97% of persons with disabilities have completed their junior high school (SMP), while the education category that people with disabilities have received the least is higher education (PT), which is only 3.38%. This reflects a significant gap for persons with disabilities in accessing elementary, junior high, and higher education [7]. Law No. 8 of 2016 concerning Persons with Disabilities, Article 10, Section Six states "Education Rights," which stipulates that persons with disabilities have the right to receive quality education in all types, paths, and levels of education inclusively and specially. Article 40 also states that the government and local governments are obliged to organize and/or facilitate education for persons with disabilities in every type, path, and level of education appropriate to their authority [2].

These responsibilities are highly relevant in the context of inclusive education for persons with disabilities, a goal that requires significant changes throughout the education system to achieve equal opportunities. Hasanuddin University has established a Disability Center as a form of support for students with disabilities. The number of registered students with disabilities in the Disability Center is significant, however it is essential to provide appropriate support to ensure their inclusivity. A deaf student mentioned that their journey at Hasanuddin University still has a lit bit obstacles; especially in terms of lecture delivery and group presentations, which pose particular difficulties for students with sensory disabilities [8]. The inability to adapt desires to the reality within and outside oneself can lead to inner pressure and conflict. Coping strategies are forms of actions or efforts made by individuals in response to stressful situations, whether these arise from external or internal sources.

Al-Shaer et al. also reveal that students with disabilities are more vulnerable to experiencing depression compared to their non-disabled peers [9]. Students with disabilities face various challenges throughout their lives. Due to their conditions, they encounter additional difficulties in class and social situations. These difficulties can have detrimental effects, potentially exacerbating depression, which impacts their quality of life and academic performance.

Although similar studies have been conducted, the issue of disability remains relatively new at Hasanuddin University, and there has yet to be a study that discusses the analysis of stress levels and coping strategies among students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. Based on the previous description, the researcher intends to further examine and discuss this matter.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The technique for selecting informants used in this research is purposive sampling, which involves establishing specific criteria for informants according to the objectives of this research [10]. The participants in this research comprised 17 individuals: 10 students with disabilities, 2 volunteers who actively assist students with disabilities, 2 lecturers who have taught students with disabilities, and 3 staff members from the disability center. The research of this study was conducted at Hasanuddin University, located at Jalan Perintis Kemerdekaan KM.10, Tamalanrea Indah, Kec. Tamalanrea, Makassar City, South Sulawesi, from September 2024 to November 2024.

The data collection process was conducted after obtaining ethical approval from the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Public Health at Hasanuddin University, with reference No. 2019/UN.4.14.1/TP.01.02/2024, and securing informed consent from the participants to engage in this research. The researcher measured the stress levels and coping strategies of students with disabilities using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10) and The Brief COPE Inventory (BCI). The questionnaire was sent via WhatsApp using a Google Form to ensure accessibility for all students with disabilities. The researcher scheduled appointments and met with the informants to conduct in-depth interviews in person. Interviews with the majority of informants were held face-to-face at Hasanuddin University, while only two informants were interviewed online via Zoom due to being out of town. During the interview process with students who are deaf, the researcher received assistance from a sign language interpreter. Throughout the interview process, the researcher utilized an interview guide along with audio recording devices, notebooks, and a camera.

Data analysis was subsequently conducted using thematic analysis. This process began with grouping the data for analysis, followed by identifying aspects related to the stress levels and coping strategies

of students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. The researcher then organized the data based on thematic similarities and created categories for stress levels, types of coping strategies, support received, and support not yet received. Next, the researcher examined the transcripts of the interview responses for themes and developed the data into concepts. The final stage involved drawing conclusions and creating a narrative [10].

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Result

3.1.1 Stress level students with disabilities

The disabled students who served as informants in this study have various disabilities. The assistive devices used also vary according to the needs of each type of disability. The researcher identified the types of disabilities of the informants through initial data obtained from the disability center at Hasanuddin University, which was then confirmed during interviews with the disabled students. The following is a table of the characteristics of the informants in this study.

Table 1: Informant characteristics.

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Description	Types of Disability	Aids
1.	A	M	Student with disability	Low Vision	White cane
2.	B	M	Student with disability	Physical Disability	Electric Motor
3.	C	M	Student with disability	Deaf	Voice-to-text
4.	D	F	Student with disability	Physical Disability	Wheelchair
5.	E	F	Student with disability	Blind	White cane
6.	F	F	Student with disability	Low Vision	-
7.	G	F	Student with disability	Mental Disability	-
8.	H	F	Student with disability	Physical Disability	-
9.	I	M	Student with disability	Physical Disability	Crutches
10.	J	M	Student with disability	Low Vision	-
11.	K	P	Volunteers	-	-
12.	L	P	Volunteers	-	-
13.	M	L	Lecturers for Disabled Students	-	-
14.	N	L	Lecturers for Disabled Students	-	-
15.	O	P	Coordinator of Disability Services Center.	-	-
16.	P	L	Coordinator of Mediation at the Disability Center.	-	-
17.	Q	L	Head of the Disability Center.	-	-

The researcher scored based on the responses of disabled students to the questionnaire provided. The results of the scoring indicate that 70% of disabled students at Hasanuddin University experience moderate stress, while 30% of other disabled students experience mild stress.

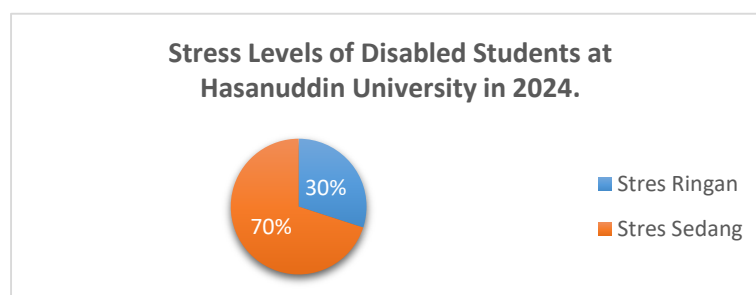


Figure 1: Diagram of stress level

The analysis of the stress levels of disabled students at Hasanuddin University shows a moderate level of stress. From the 10 questions in the stress assessment questionnaire, the results indicate that 70% experience moderate stress, while the remaining 30% experience mild stress. The majority of disabled students responded "very often" to the statement, "I feel anxious and pressured by the problems I face." Meanwhile, 80% of disabled students answered "often" to the statement, "I feel disturbed when something unexpected happens." These statements indicate that disabled students still frequently experience these feelings during their academic process at Hasanuddin University. This occurs because they face various challenges and limitations in campus facilities.

Informant I (physical disability student) stated that they have difficulty accessing new places that are mostly rocky, making them inaccessible with the prosthetic leg they have. In addition, he also finds it challenging to go upstairs without handrails, as they have to climb the stairs using crutches. Informant I mentioned that they almost fell while going up the stairs at the rectorate campus, which had no handrails. This was expressed because they feel more at risk of falling on stairs without handrails when walking with crutches and carrying a heavy backpack with books and a laptop.

The second challenge identified is the obstacle in the learning process. It was found in Informant E (sensory disability student), who stated that they experience difficulties in the classroom, such as lecturers who did not understand how to provide learning materials that are accessible for visually impaired students. Often, they found that lecturers present lessons in class using PowerPoint slides that were not provided or sent to her for access with screen reader applications on their phones or laptop. Unlike visually impaired students who need audio when the lecturer explains in class, Informant C, who has a hearing impairment, feels that they did not receive their learning information if the lecturer only explains verbally. They require materials that were created in visual formats, such as PowerPoint, to be accessible for reading. Because there was no sign language interpreter provided in the classroom during the learning process.

Another obstacle identified is the social and psychological barriers experienced by disabled students. The stigma from those around them regarding disabilities is still present in the environment of Hasanuddin University. This makes it difficult for some disabled students to socialize on campus. The uneven perspective on disabilities leads people to be unaware of the etiquette for interacting with the disabled. Informant F (sensory disability student) finds it difficult to socialize with friends in their faculty. Informant F feels that their friends prefer not to involve them in group assignments due to their disability. Their friends assumed that Informant F cannot contribute to group tasks. This is illustrated in the following quote:

"...At that time, I didn't know how to communicate to my friends that even though I couldn't participate in group work, I still wanted to be involved. At least, teach me how to do it or give me a part that I could work on. But my friends agreed not to involve me. So, I ended up confused on my own." (F, Visually Impaired, 16/09/2024).

However, social and psychological barriers also come from within the disabled students themselves. They feel different from their peers, which limits their ability to interact. They also feel that it would be too much trouble if they had to receive assistance from those around them.

Administrative and policy barriers also become stressors for disabled students on campus. Informant Q (Head of disability center) stated that inclusive policies are still not evenly implemented at Hasanuddin University. This is evidenced by the fact that during the admission of disabled students, there are still some faculties that are unwilling to accept disabled students. Additionally, disabled students tend to be directed to choose less popular majors without being given the freedom to select majors according to their interests and needs.

Coping strategies students with disabilities

Coping strategies were measured through a questionnaire consisting of 28 questions. About 60% of disabled students face the challenges and concerns they experience with problem-focused coping. The majority of respondents, or 70%, answered "often" to the statement, "When facing a problem, I try to get advice or help from others to overcome it." Additionally, disabled students also predominantly answered "very often" to the statement, "I try to create strategies to solve the problems I am facing." This indicates that they are making efforts to resolve the issues they encounter.

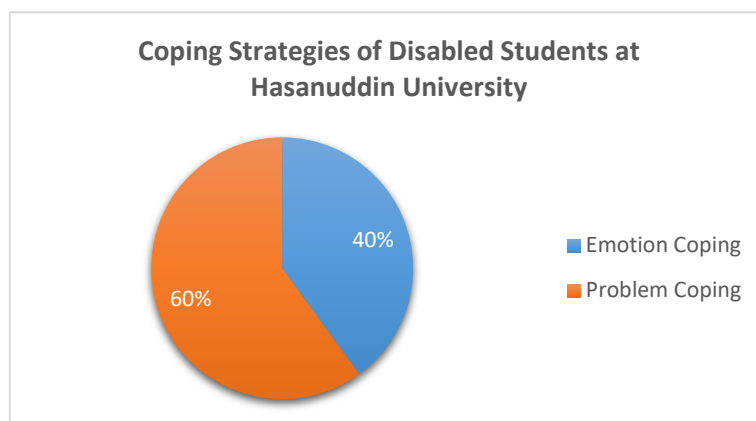


Figure 2: Diagram of coping strategies

Students with disabilities efforts to cope with stress by managing or changing the problems faced and the surrounding environment that causes pressure. The problem-focused coping strategies employed by disabled students include efforts to improve a situation by making changes or taking certain actions, as well as immediate efforts to address threats to themselves. In facing the challenges of limited facilities or physical accessibility on campus, disabled students cope with the pressure they feel by taking several actions, such as using assistive devices and seeking alternative measures. This is exemplified by Informant A (sensory disability student) confront the limitations of campus facilities, which are often full of holes and rocky, by using a white cane.

In addition, the coping strategies employed by disabled students in facing challenges during the learning process include improving the situations that cause stress in their learning. The majority of students take action by directly communicating with their lecturers or seeking help from friends around them. Friends, such as classmates and volunteers at the disability center, provide supportive companionship, such as assisting with assignments for visually impaired and hearing-impaired students, as well as providing mobility assistance for physically disabled students.

Volunteers build supportive friendships with disabled students. The presence of volunteers at the Disability Center assists disabled students who need help with assignments and mobility assistance. The friendship support between volunteers and disabled students grows stronger as they organize activities together that are part of the Disability Center's programs. One of the efforts made by deaf students to gain support from their friends is by inviting them to learn sign language so they can help in communication.

In addition, in facing the challenges of social and psychological limitations, disabled students employ coping strategies by creating their own uniqueness or distinct characteristics so that people want to interact with them. Disabled students seek alternative ways for people not to focus on their disabilities, but instead, they explore their potential so that others see the abilities they possess.

Some disabled students reduce stress and anxiety in facing the limitations and challenges they encounter by managing their emotions with emotion focused coping. Challenges in the learning process, such as the uneven perspective on disabilities among the entire academic community at Hasanuddin University, including the lecturers teaching disabled students, are faced by disabled students with patience and by fostering positive affirmations in their minds.

Informants E and F (sensory disability student) stated that in facing social and psychological challenges, they manage their emotions and thoughts by providing positive affirmations to themselves to avoid overthinking and becoming stressed about these challenges. They reassure and motivate themselves that the social obstacles they experience can be overcome over time.

The same approach is taken by Informant D (physical disability student). They face social and psychological limitations by managing their emotions by viewing situations positively. They divert their thoughts from the challenges and limitations they face. They do not view their friends negatively for not inviting them to socialize. Instead, they assess the situation positively to avoid being a burden to their friends. This can be seen in the following quote:

"...If no one invites me to the canteen, I just sit quietly and patiently in class until it's over. I also don't want to trouble my friends if inviting me means they have to push and lift my wheelchair." (D, Physically Disabled, 20/9/2024).

Some disabled students who cope with challenges using emotion-focused coping report receiving emotional support, such as sharing stories and being motivated by their families and the disability center. This is reflected in the statements of Informants I and C, who say that when they feel insecure about their disabilities or doubt their abilities in navigating their studies at Hasanuddin University, they receive encouragement and motivation from their families and volunteer friends at the Disability Center.

3.2 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study outline the complex dynamics that affect the stress levels of students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. This study identified several factors, including internal factors, external factors, and academic factors [11]. Internal factors are the social and psychological barriers experienced by students with disabilities. The external factors identified are limitations in physical facilities/accessibility as well as administrative and campus policy barriers. The academic factors refer to obstacles in the learning process.

The uneven perspective on disability throughout the campus community leads to social barriers. This is because non-disabled individuals do not know or are even afraid to interact with those who have disabilities. The fluctuating self-confidence and self-acceptance of students with disabilities lead them to limit their interactions with those around them [12], [13]. Policies are also still not entirely equitable and friendly to students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. Administrative procedures that are not inclusive are obstacles for students with disabilities in undergoing their academic process. Decree of the Chancellor of Hasanuddin University Number 05613/UN4.1/KEP/2023 Concerning the Establishment of the Hasanuddin University Disability Center as a form of commitment to realizing an inclusive campus that upholds diversity and equality. Improvements in inclusive campus policies and administration can immediately fulfill the rights of students with disabilities and provide a sense of security and comfort in pursuing education [14], [15], [16], [17].

Many campus facilities are not disability-friendly make students with disabilities feel unsafe and uncomfortable when moving around independently. Meanwhile, the layout of the buildings and the expansive environment of Hasanuddin University requires them to engage in high mobility in their academic processes. Therefore, the limitations in facilities and physical accessibility make students with disabilities always depend on the assistance of those around them. An accessibility audit of Hasanuddin University has been conducted, and the findings indicate that facilities such as elevators, special toilets, and evacuation routes in several buildings are available but do not meet the size and access standards for disabilities [18]. Although some locations are already disability-friendly, there are still many facilities at Hasanuddin University that are not accessible for individuals with disabilities. Unprovided support that is needed will impact the mental health of the disabled individuals themselves. This is due to the fact that most university facilities are old buildings, which means that the spaces are not adapted to the needs of students with disabilities [19], [20].

This study also reveals the coping strategies employed by students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University when facing stress. They engage in problem-focused coping by seeking alternative steps, such as using assistive devices and seeking help from others [21]. In addition to receiving assistance from volunteers, students with disabilities also strategize by using assistive tools like canes to detect rocky and uneven roads that could cause them to fall while moving around. Students with disabilities consistently seek alternative measures to continue their academic process at Hasanuddin University, although they strongly hope for improvements in accessibility so they can move independently, safely, and comfortably on campus [9], [22].

Some students with disabilities reduce pressure and anxiety when facing learning process obstacles and social limitations by employing emotion-focused coping, which involves controlling their emotions. Referring to the research findings, students with disabilities cope with feelings of worry about not being able to interact with their peers by fostering positive affirmations in their minds that the challenges they face will pass and that they can continue their lives in their own way. This aligns

with research indicating that self-acceptance in blind students has seven indicators: being positive about oneself, acknowledging and accepting personal strengths and weaknesses, having a positive view of the past, being satisfied with oneself, accepting others' perceptions or judgments, being open to oneself, and seeing oneself realistically [12], [23].

The actions taken include being patient, self-acceptance, and having a positive assessment of the challenges faced. This aligns with the research by Manase which states that difficulties in learning increase the risk of failure, leading to anxiety and emotional pressure on students with disabilities. This affects the participation of students with disabilities in class. Therefore, the majority of students with disabilities adopt self-assertion strategies to cope with the emotional challenges stemming from learning difficulties. This can boost their confidence and help them progress academically [24], [25].

Creating an inclusive educational environment for students with disabilities is a challenge that requires serious attention from all parties on campus [26]. Every student, regardless of their limitations, has the right to equal opportunities to learn and grow. Therefore, it is important to apply effective teaching methods that take into account academic needs, access to information, and interaction in the learning process [27], [28]. The Minister of Research, Technology, and Higher Education Regulation Indonesia Number 46 of 2017 concerning Special Education and Special Service Education in Higher Education. The Ministerial Regulation is equipped with a guidebook that provides information to universities in providing special services for disabilities. The guidebook explains that the arrangement of the physical environment in higher education must provide convenience, comfort and security for students with disabilities so that they can carry out activities independently and effectively [29], [30].

4. CONCLUSION

The majority of students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University experience moderate stress. The stress they experience is caused by various stressors. These stressors arise from several factors, namely internal factors (social and psychological barriers), external factors (limitations of facilities/accessibility and administrative and campus policy limitations), and academic factors (constraints in the learning process).

Students with disabilities face challenges and obstacles that they have by employing problem-focused coping strategies. These strategies include using assistive devices, seeking alternative solutions, and asking for help from others. When experiencing difficulties in the learning process, these strategies involve taking action by directly communicating with the lecturer, seeking assistance from peers, and exploring other alternatives. When facing social and psychological limitations, students with disabilities adopt coping strategies by creating their own uniqueness or distinct characteristics to encourage others to interact with them.

Some students with disabilities attempt to cope with stress by managing their emotional responses to adapt to the impacts caused by stressful situations. The actions taken to address challenges in the learning process and social barriers involve regulating emotions and controlling thoughts through positive affirmations regarding the obstacles they face.

5. LIMITATION OF STUDY

This research found the barriers and supports that influence the stress levels and coping strategies of students with disabilities at Hasanuddin University. However, these findings cannot be generalized to a wider population outside of Hasanuddin University.

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