

University of Twente
Health Psychology and Technology
Thesis

The Strengths Used by Young Adults to Cope with their Anxiety in their Everyday Life

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June 2020

ABSTRACT

Background: Anxiety is currently one of the most common mental disorders experienced by young adults. The uniqueness of the following study is to explore the strengths and self-management acquired by young adults between the ages of 19-29 and by gaining insight into their well-being. Consequently, it could help young adults cope with their anxiety in a better way.

Methods: To gain insight into the two aspects, ten young adults who experience anxiety, recruited by convenience sampling, were interviewed with a semi-structured interview. The interviews aimed to explore young adults' self-management strategies and strengths while coping with anxiety in their everyday lives. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed by using a coding scheme based on an inductive approach.

Results: A total of 18 different codes were identified, four belong to their challenges and consequences, four self-management strategies, and ten strengths were coded. . The ten codes for strengths were (1) communicative; (2) self-awareness; (3) being kind to oneself; (4) resilience; (5) acceptance; (6) positive outlook; (7) goal-oriented; (8) creativity; (9) caring; and (10) spirituality. As for the four codes for self-management strategies are: (1) creating a routine; (2) finding a distraction; (3) therapy/ professional help; and finally (4) breathing exercises and physical activity. These strengths were either used autonomously or as an establishment of self-management strategies. Besides, the implications of these strengths were investigated regarding the impact on their wellbeing.

Discussion: Young adults use these strategies and strengths to adapt to their life regarding their anxiety and facilitate maintaining their well-being. Overall, this is the first study that examined self-management strategies and strengths among young adults with anxiety. Young adults who experience anxiety declare akin enhancements when implementing their strengths and self-management strategies. Particularly, the use of strengths helps them cope with their experience with their anxiety, and the use of the self-management strategies assists them to moderate their everyday struggles challenges.

INTRODUCTION

All individuals experience anxiety, it is an innate human state and an important part of one's life (Anisman, Hayley, & Kusnecov, 2018). Anxiety encourages humans to distinguish and react to danger 'fight or flight' mode (Anisman, Hayley, & Kusnecov, 2018). The 'good' amount of anxiety can assist individuals with performing better and inspiring actions and creativity. This type of anxiety could help in meeting a deadline, and deal with emergencies in life (Koydemir & Essau, 2018). Although anxiety at modest levels can be adaptive, when excessive, it undermines day-to-day functioning and that is when it is classified as an anxiety disorder (Anisman, Hayley, & Kusnecov, 2018). Based on the National Institute of Mental Health, anxiety disorders are the most prevalent mental disorders and according to their large population-based surveys, up to 33.7% of the population is affected by it (De Lijster et al., 2017; Stein, Scott, Jonge, & Kessler, 2017). In particular, young adults portray the highest prevalence of anxiety disorders (De Lijster et al., 2017; Stein, Scott, Jonge, & Kessler, 2017). Approximately 1 out of 3 young adults will experience anxiety at some point in their lives with an occurrence rate of 19.1% (Woods & Scott, 2016). A prior study identified multiple factors that could be contributing to the increase of anxiety among young adults, which are mainly genetics, brain chemistry, personality and life events, and as well as social media which had the biggest impact (Woods & Scott, 2016).

Anxiety disorders are an umbrella term that includes different conditions and it forms a category of a mental health diagnosis that leads to excessive nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worry (Koydemir & Essau, 2018). These feelings may cause physical symptoms, for instance, a fast heart rate and shakiness (Anisman, Hayley, & Kusnecov, 2018). McKnight, Monfort, Kashdan, Blalock, and Calton (2016) found that constant anxiety induces real emotional distress and can prompt feelings such as uneasiness. In addition, at worst, developing anxiety disorders could lead to panic attacks, phobias, and obsessive behaviors which are

categorized under anxiety. Anxiety at this level impacts one's life by adding distress and debilitation to physical health as well as mental health in which it interferes with their everyday functioning (McElroy, Fearon, Belsky, Fonagy & Patalay, 2018).

There are several challenges that young adults physically experience as a result of anxiety such as the feeling of restlessness, nervousness or being tense, in addition to an increase in heart rate, rapid breathing, and trembling, etc.; which in some cases could lead to a panic attack (Hedges, Farrer, Bigler & Hopkins, 2019). However, anxiety affects young adults in different aspects. A study has shown that the excessive irrational worrying and the constant apprehension impacts their social relationships (Schäfer, Naumann, Holmes, Tuschen-Caffier & Samson, 2017). Continuous and unsubstantiated anxiety causes significant distress and interferes with day to day functions such as difficulty concentrating, and indecisiveness. A study done by Hedges, Farere, Bigler, and Hopkins (2019) has revealed that young adults with anxiety experience trouble sleeping, recurring nightmares and flashbacks, fatigue, and in general are overwhelmed by uncertainty.

Given how overpowering anxiety could be, often over the long run, it could lead young adults to believe that anxiety defines them. Therefore, for young adults to cope with their anxiety, they may implement self-management strategies, that is, behavior deliberated to alleviate their symptoms, prevent relapses, and improve their well-being and health (Rotegård et al., 2012). Overall, the use of such strategies plays a significant role in mental health recovery (Patten et al., 2006). An illustration of a self-management strategy could be developing a better understanding of one's situation. In this case, after one comprehends their situation, they could analyze and change their behavior accordingly and therefore learn about their available resources in which it aids in managing the daily symptoms (Patten et al., 2006).

Although, self-management strategies are known to be fundamental for recovery, yet only one prior study documented the strategies used explicitly by patients with mood disorders and anxiety disorders (Villaggi et al., 2015). The findings of the study revealed that health behaviors including physical activity, healthy food, and reduced smoking were one of the main self-management strategies patients used to cope with their anxiety. Another self-management strategy that was mentioned in the aforementioned study was “managing daily symptoms” which includes analyzing and changing one’s thoughts or emotions. It also emphasizes on looking for solutions to a problematic situation and to gain new perspectives on situations (Villaggi et al., 2015).

Besides, young adults with anxiety show common strengths that serve as important psychological resources during anxious situations. These strengths operate as a schema that rationalizes and processes information towards the self, others, and the world, thus aids in self-managing their anxieties (Li, Duan & Guo, 2017). Strengths include for example resilience, courage, acceptance towards one’s situation. Overall, strengths can be characterized as personal characteristics and qualities which are incorporated into various approaches, to obtain and maintain well-being (Rotegård et al., 2010). Hence, strengths can change and influence wellbeing and aid in coping with anxiety (Rotegård et al., 2010). Furthermore, they aid young adults to look for optimal functioning and increase their well-being. Additionally, they advocate resilience and it enables them to manage their anxiety (Lerner, Bowers, Geldhof, Gestsdóttir, & DeSouza, 2012). For instance, as anxiety could be mentally tantalizing and prevailing, they learn the ability to mentally and emotionally cope with it which helps one maintain their anxiety (Li, Duan & Guo, 2017).

There is an association between self-management strategies and one’s personal strengths. Strengths are what drives individuals to acquire what they want to do, and self-management strategies are what enables them to achieve it (Villaggi et al., 2015). For instance,

the aforementioned study by Villaggi et al. (2015), showed that patients diagnosed with anxiety mentioned how their social group helps them with their anxiety. In this case, their strengths are being social and their self-management strategy would be the act of conversing with their social groups including friends and family. In other words, when utilizing self-management strategies, a collection of assets, otherwise called strengths, is essential. These strengths are simply the establishment of the self-management strategy. Namely, strengths like altering thoughts, acceptance, and modification of health behaviors were found vital for young adults to cope with their distress (Kristjansdottir et al., 2018). These can be depicted as possibilities a young adult possesses to develop or change. Furthermore, they are innate in each individual however not necessarily used by them. The advancement and the use of strengths profoundly rely upon the physical and mental state of the young adult in combination with the surroundings and their environment (Rotegård et al., 2010).

Even though strengths are known to be significant to maintain one's mental health, few researchers have examined them on young adults with anxiety. Hence, the following study aims to gain insight on the strengths and self-management strategies concerning anxiety in young adults, by answering the following question: *"How do young adults use their strengths to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday life?"*. Anxiety is currently one of the most common mental disorders experienced by young adults. Thus, the uniqueness of the following study is to explore the strengths and self-management acquired by young adults and by gaining insight into their well-being. Consequently, it could help young adults cope with their anxiety in a better way.

METHODS

Participants

The sample of the current study consisted of 10 participants, that were recruited by a convenience sample (Table 1). The inclusion criteria for participation was to be between the

age of 19- 29 and being hindered by anxiety in their daily lives either diagnosed or self-reported. In total, eight women and two men were interviewed, and their ages varied from 20 to 26. Eight participants were from Egypt, one was from the Caribbean's and one participant was from Jordan.

Table 1. *Demographics and background details of participants*

Characteristics		N.
Gender	Male	2
	Female	8
Age	Mean	22
	Range in years	20-26
Nationality	Egyptians	8
	Caribbean	1
	Jordan	1
Class of Anxiety	Diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder	7
	Self-reported experience	3

Procedure

Before the sampling process began, an approval from the ethical committee of the University of Twente was required (request number 200333).

Participants were recruited from the researcher's own environment. In total, the researcher reached out to 12 participants, a brief introduction of the current study was explained to them in a phone call, where the aim of the study and the research question was explained. 10 of them agreed to take part in the study, and shortly after the time of the interview was arranged.. The informed consent form was sent to the participant via email 30 minutes ahead of the interview, they were asked to sign it and send it back. The informed consent found

in Appendix A included information about confidentiality, and anonymity while transcribing the interviews, and assured that the data will be destroyed and will only be used for this study. If the participants did not have any further inquiries, the interview started and each lasted approximately 30 – 45 minutes long, the video-conferences were conducted using the application Zoom, and the record function in the application was used for recording. The interview started with a short introduction, then the participants' demographics were gathered followed by the interview questions. After the last question of the interview, the participants were asked again if their data could be used in the study and if they have any further inquiries. Lastly, the participants were thanked for their participation, and the recording of the interview was stopped.

Interview

An extensive interview scheme (Appendix B) was used to explore and gain insight into the life of young adults with anxiety. The questions were based on the strength-based approach however, they were altered in accordance with the research (Rashid, 2015). The interview was semi-structured and focused on three main aspects 1) demographics and background information, 2) current situation and feelings, and 3) strengths and self-management strategies. After the participants demographics were identified, the interview shifted to the second aspect asking about their prevailing situation and how anxiety influences their life. Furthermore, it focused on the challenges that they face in their daily lives while experiencing anxiety and how they self-manage it. A question such as “*What kind of problems or challenges do you face in your daily life because of anxiety?*” was asked. For each question, the follow-up question was asked as such “*how do you cope with these problems?*”.

The third aspect of the interview focused on their personal strengths and how they use them to self-manage their anxiety. First, the term ‘strengths’ was defined to the participants as

positive attributes that one possesses that helps them cope with their anxiety. Also, self-management strategies were illustrated as behavior or coping strategies deliberated to alleviate their symptoms and to decrease their triggers to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday life. A question like “*what is your biggest strength or resource?*”. Again, further, sub-questions were asked to gain further insight as such “*How does this help you manage your anxiety?*”. Other questions aimed at self-management strategies that help with anxiety, such as “*what self-management strategies help you cope with anxiety?*”. Nevertheless, the participants sometimes struggled to come up with their strengths and self-management strategies. Thus, a list of self-management skills by a prior study done by Villaggi et al. (2015) was used as an encouragement. However, as there are no prior studies that examined solely anxiety patients, the other study’s focus was mood disorders in general. Therefore, it was not put in use as the participants did not relate to these strategies, yet, it helped to give examples. In fact, due to the global pandemic, the participants tended to focus on the current overwhelming anxiety that it was challenging to get insight on their coping mechanisms and strengths. Therefore, after the participants would state an example of a situation where they were anxious, an encouraging probe would be asked ‘*How did you deal back then? or ‘ What helped you the most?’*. Overall, sub-questions and probes had to be asked multiple times for the participants to realize their positive attributes.

Afterward, questions were asked about how they manage all these stressors by the implementation of their strengths. All in all, with the help of these questions, information was gathered about the strengths that young adults have. This should give some hints on how they imply these strengths to self-manage their anxiety.

Data Analysis

After conducting all ten interviews, transcribing was done verbatim, and the names of the respondents were not included to ensure confidentiality and were replaced by X. Atlas.ti

software was used for coding all the interviews. Iterative and systematic steps were used during the data analysis. After transcribing the interviews, a content analysis was conducted to gain insight into possible strengths and self-management strategies. For this, an inductive approach was chosen since the aim is to arrive at a theoretical construct of the strengths that were mentioned by young adults with anxiety. Hence, all interviews were used to develop a coding scheme for different strengths. The codes were conducted in an iterative way to cover all the different relevant and irrelevant answers and to avoid overlapping between different codes. Codes were created and described, and it was revised twice through categorizing fragments to the codes and if necessary, creating new codes. The coding scheme was derived through the common themes of the situations described by the respondents. Besides, intersubjectivity was ensured by the constant comparison of interview fragments and the different respondents. The final coding scheme included a total of 16 codes; two codes belong to their current situation and feelings, ten codes to strengths, and four to self-management strategies (Appendix C). The ten codes for strengths were (1) communicative; (2) self-awareness; (3) being kind to oneself; (4) resilience; (5) acceptance; (6) positive outlook; (7) goal-oriented; (8) creativity; (9) caring; and (10) spirituality. As for the four codes for self-management strategies are: (1) creating a routine; (2) finding a distraction; (3) therapy/ professional help; and finally (4) breathing exercises and physical activity.

RESULTS

In total after conducting the analysis, there were four self-management strategies and ten various strengths were identified to answer the research question: *how do young adults use their strengths to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday life?* The codes were organized in the table based on the frequency of the strengths and self-management strategies repeated among the respondents (extended version of the tables can be found in Appendix C).

Challenges and Consequences

During the interviews, the participants expressed what it was like to live with anxiety, this included the day-to-day struggles that they face and the impact that anxiety has on their life (Table 2).

Table 2. *Challenges and consequences mentioned by the respondents*

Concept	Themes	Frequency N.	Quotation
Challenges	Facing uncertainties	9	R5: "Uncertainty is my biggest problem with anxiety, I'm very uncertain I have a million ideas in my head, I'm always indecisive. Uncertainty drives me crazy, it's something that comes out of anxiety and it contributes to my anxiety, it's one of my biggest issues"
	Being misunderstood	7	R2: "I used to never talk about my anxiety and how I'm feeling because no one understands how anxiety can affect you on a day to day basis. Which then increases my anxiety"
Consequences	Social relationships	7	R3: "The social aspect of my life is affected the most by anxiety because I am super anxious the most when I'm in a social setting, or it just increases in a social setting, like getting a sudden panic attack on a train. When I get anxious I start by distancing myself from the situation, people sometimes think that I am being antisocial, but they don't understand and that's why anxiety affects my social aspect."
	Work/Studies	7	R7: "When I am anxious it affects my work right away, it affects my focusing span and my motivation as well. It consumes my whole thoughts therefor I cannot focus on work at all."

Along with their day-to-day challenges, nine participants have portrayed a challenge that they face is *uncertainty*. Based on the participants uncertainty means thinking about

possible future threats, accompanied by the emotion and bodily sensation of anxiety. As shown by the following quote:

“Anxiety is rough, there are lots of uncertainties which increases my anxiety. Any unpredictable inconvenience fuels my anxiety for example, I could be chilling with friends and all of a sudden I get super anxious, and heavy breathing feels like the room is small. But it is not like normal panic attacks, it’s as if I have a panic attack internally and if someone would see me they wouldn’t know that I have a panic attack because everything happens inside my head. My face starts to heat up and I start extremely sweating, but I do not cry or yell or anything all these things are in my head and thoughts.”

Another challenge participants also deal with is the issue of *being misunderstood*, seven participants portrayed that the people around them tend to not understand how anxiety could get triggered from the simplest aspects. As conveyed by one of the participants:

“...I get anxious whether I want to go out or stay in, this thought in itself gives me so much anxiety. And people tend not to understand, they think I’m indecisive and that does not make sense to them that I’m anxious only because of this. But this is how anxiety is it does not make sense and could be triggered by anything, I do understand that they do not get because they do not know how it feels.”

Furthermore, the participants declared the consequences that result from experiencing anxiety. Seven participants portrayed that their *social relationships* are influenced the most by anxiety. As aforementioned, the people around them misconceive anxiety, it tends to be hard for others to understand the sudden episodes that anxiety elicits. As shown by the following quote: *“Living with anxiety is really troubling it affects my relationships with friends or family, and it’s hard because no one really understands how anxiety affects you and how long it takes to feel better. Sometimes people don’t understand that I need space to deal with my anxiety and they take it personal so it consequently it affects our relationship.”*

Notably, seven of the participants also described that anxiety impacts their focusing span thus it affects their *work/studies*. In the following quote the participant states a glimpse of anxiety consequential effect:

“Definitely my studies gives me anxiety, having due dates and assignments all that. Like anxiety also affects my relationship with people but they mainly all know that I have anxiety. But work and university, only understands my anxiety to a certain degree. And at the end of the day, I signed up for this so it is my responsibility not theirs. So I think university is affected the most by anxiety, and it causes also lots of my anxiety.”

Self-management Strategies

Various self-management strategies were mentioned by young adults in the interviews (Table 3). These strategies help them to cope with their overwhelming anxiety. With the aid of self-management strategies, they can manage their anxieties and their apprehensions to a moderate level in their everyday life.

Table 3. *Self-management strategies mentioned by the respondents*

Concept	Themes	Frequency N.	Quotation
Self-Management Strategies	Creating a Routine	7	R8: “I have been trying to have a routine for myself since the start of quarantine, I have been trying to keep my anxiety to a manageable level”
	Find a distraction	7	R10: “I try my best to distract myself, watching something, or playing video games, reading, any sort of distraction helps”

Table 3. *Continued*

Concept	Themes	Frequency N.	Quotation
	Seeking professional help and therapies	7	R2: “Also, I started accepting therapy and seeking professional help, talking to someone that actually understands and takes anxiety seriously has helped a lot.”
	Breathing Exercises/ Physical Activity	6	R4: “Whenever I feel anxious I would do breathing exercises, or go for a little walk to calm myself down.”

The first self-management strategy that was mentioned by seven of the respondents, is *creating a routine*. It was shown by the interviewees how important it is for them to have a fixed yet not a rigid schedule, as it aids them in minimizing their anxiety triggers. By having this routine, they ensure to control the small inconveniences that could elicit unnecessary and unwanted anxieties. As one of the respondents mentioned in the following quote: “*Creating a routine even if I am not going to follow it step by step but it helps to create a structure which lessens the triggers.*” Especially during the global pandemic, all seven respondents mentioned the importance of maintaining structure as the lack of the daily routine can exacerbate their distress. An example of such a routine was mentioned by one of the respondents “*waking up at a fixed time, I started setting up my alarm at 8 am every day. I created a home office that I work in from 9-5, and I even change into work attire when I start working in this space, then I do some yoga and practice piano. A structure in my day helped me especially in these times.*”

Seven participants mentioned that *finding a distraction* helps them moderate their anxieties. The participants portrayed the importance of having their attention drawn away from the negative unwanted thoughts. Due to their overthinking habit because of their anxiety, they tend to find a distraction that consumes their mind entirely such as chess or reading. One

respondent clarified the significance of finding a distraction *“I try to distract myself for a while, not until it’s gone because anxiety doesn’t go away, just until it’s at a manageable level. This distraction helps because I distance myself just a bit so I could collect my thoughts and put my emotions into place because anxiety is irrational.”*

Seven of the participants stated that one of the strategies that help them cope with their anxiety is *seeking professional help* and therapy. A lot of young adults that were interviewed said that when their anxiety peaked it was important to seek help from a professional. They elaborated that this is because professionals understand the nature of their anxiety and thus can help them cope better with irrational thoughts. One participant stated *“Therapy helped me with all the anxieties and fears that stems from childhood and it helped me overcome these”*.

Finally, the last strategy that was mentioned by six of the participants, is doing *breathing and physical exercises*. Being active, especially when they are anxious helps them transform this anxiety into physical activity which helps them to feel better. Furthermore, given how intense anxiety could be, respondents mentioned that it is often hard to breathe which then triggers a panic attack. By doing breathing exercises, it helps them to calm down and avoid the triggers. One of the respondents quoted: *“By running because it increases my endorphins. And I try to focus on my breathing and the fact that I am focusing on breathing because I’m running and not because of anxiety on its own helps.”*

Strengths

Based on the interviews, strengths were mentioned by the interviewees, which helped them manage their physical and psychological problems that occur with anxiety (Table 4). Relating it to self-management, strengths are the fundamental aspect of these strategies, and realizing one’s strengths is one of the essential coping strategies of anxiety.

Table 4. *Strengths mentioned by the respondents*

Concept	Themes	Frequency N.	Quotation
Strengths	Communicative	9	R3: "Talking to someone that's level headed and not as anxious as I gives me perspective on the situation which eases my anxiety"
	Self-awareness	8	R1: "I'm pretty level-headed, I always try to remain calm and I'm super self-aware with anxiety so I'm always aware when I'm going to get anxious so I try as much as I can to remain calm and to manage it."
	Being kind to oneself	6	R4: "It's about constant reminders, telling myself that it is okay and to cut myself some slack."
	Resilience	6	R2: "I'm also resilient and because I have had anxiety for so long I don't let it take as much control of my life as much as it used to."
	Acceptance	6	R10: "I have accepted my anxiety, have accepted its limitations and weaknesses, and that has helped with it as well."
	Having a positive outlook	5	R6: "Having a positive outlook sometimes, reminding myself of how good things are."
	Goal-oriented	4	R5: "I have a growth mindset and self-awareness. I am always aware of what triggers my anxiety and my emotions towards it, and I am ready to move on and find ways to help myself."
	Creativity	3	R8: "Lately, doodling or drawing some sort of self-expression, letting myself be creative help."
	Caring	3	R9: "Taking care of the people around me, I do not give it the power to affect my relationship with people or how I feel towards them."
	Spirituality	3	R5: "I am a very spiritual person, I pray when I feel anxious, of course, that does not mean that my anxiety goes away I just feel heard and it gives me serenity."

The first and most frequent strength mentioned by nine of the participants was being *communicative*. All the participants that mentioned being communicative as a strength portrayed how troubling and overwhelming anxiety could be, especially when they are anxious, talking to another more composed person, eases this overwhelming feeling. Some participants explained that given how devastating anxiety could be, it might elicit irrational thoughts. Therefore, talking to the people around them reassures and softens their distress, and sometimes helps to see other perspectives. While another mentioned that talking to friends and family helps only as a distraction: *“Talking to someone, and expressing how I feel helps the most. I am very expressive and communicative, and I feel like taking the thoughts outside my head and articulating them into words already helps. Putting my emotions and my feelings into words, making it audible, is me trying to make sense of my anxiety”*.

The second strength is *self-awareness*, which was mentioned by eight out of the ten participants. Given how overpowering anxiety could be, understanding oneself and different emotions to understand one's triggers was conveyed to be of importance. Quoting one of the participants: *“if you have anxiety, you need to have a sense of self and sense of who you are as a person, being self-aware, and you have to be aware of your strengths to know how to handle and manage anxiety.”* When they get anxious, they start analyzing and understanding why it got triggered, hence they can avoid the triggers later. One of the participants quoted: *“I try to be mentally aware when I’m in a situation that makes me feel overwhelmed or anxious. I try to make a conscious effort to remember to breathe, I also try to remind myself that even though everything might seem pretty bad now I remind myself that at some point it is going to be okay”*.

Another strength that was mentioned by six of the participants was *being kind to oneself*. Due to anxiety, and its associated self-destructive thoughts young adults learned the ability to talk kindly and be more forgiving with themselves. The participants conveyed the

significance of positive affirmation, which is the practice of positive thinking about oneself and self-empowerment. Another important aspect that was mentioned was spending alone time, due to the intensity of anxiety taking some personal time in the day to calm oneself down as an act of self-love. After one of the participants voiced how draining it is to have anxiety *“I have to sweet-talk myself because anxiety makes you downgrade yourself. So, I sweet-talk myself, remind myself that I got through it and that I am a strong person and just take some time off for myself in the day”*.

Being *resilient* was another strength shown by six of the participants. As anxiety could be mentally irresistible and powerful, they had to learn the ability to mentally and emotionally cope with it which helps them maintain their anxiety. One of the respondents conveyed the significance of resilience: *“I feel like it’s important to have a personality trait like resilience, you have to be resilient to whatever is happening because it can consume you and before you know it you don’t have any friends or anyone anymore. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity and anxiety and being proactive, not ignoring one’s problem. Instead, figuring out what needs to be done, adapting to one’s situation.”* The participants portrayed that being resilient does not only help them to cope with anxiety, but it also empowers them to grow and even improve their wellbeing.

Another strength mentioned by six participants is *acceptance*. This means, reconciling oneself with the situation and coming to terms with one’s anxiety. The way one responds to anxiety impacts their lives, accepting their limitations and weaknesses have been portrayed to have a positive impact on their well-being. The respondents mentioned that an effective way of dealing with anxiety is by accepting their anxious thoughts. For instance one of the participants clarified *“Accepting my anxiety made a huge difference, for example, I used to get embarrassed to tell my friends that I do not want to hang out when I am anxious instead of*

forcing myself to go and I forced myself to go to these outings, which made it worse. But now I do not force myself to go on these outings, which definitely decreases my anxiety and helps it.” Six of the young adults have portrayed that after they have accepted their anxiety and given it the weight it deserves; their well-being was improved.

Having a positive outlook, was another strength that was portrayed by five of the respondents. This one emphasizes the importance of being optimistic, and hopeful of positive outcomes. Furthermore, they illustrated that as anxiety evokes absurd thoughts, they try to keep positive thoughts and focus on those while trying to disregard the negative ones. For instance, a participant explained: *“To manage my anxiety I always keep a positive outlook, reminding myself of how good things are. So, if I think of a time where my anxiety peaked, I always look at it as that I passed through this phase, and I was able to get out of it, rather than focus on how negative anxiety is and how it consumed me.”*

Another strength that was mentioned by four of the participants was being *goal-oriented*, having a growth mindset was conveyed to be important to them. One of the participants mentioned: *“What kind of strengths help you to cope with anxiety? I am very solution-oriented, so whenever I feel anxious I instantly try to think of ways to not feel anxious, I don’t let anxiety drown me anymore”*. As living with anxiety could be troubling, being determined to find solutions or coping mechanisms aids them to manage their overwhelming anxiety.

Creativity was another strength mentioned by three participants. The use of imagination or original ideas to create something that eases one’s anxiety. Creativity was shown to be of importance to some, as illustrated by the following quote: *“Whenever anxiety starts to be crippling, then this is always the time for me to start a new project especially something that has to do with creativity. For example, now I started learning the piano.”* Drawing and

doodling, helped some respondents to ease their anxiety while playing musical instruments calmed other respondents.

Another strength that was stated by three young adults was *caring*, in terms of taking care of and being empathetic towards others. Due to their anxiety, it increased their sense of empathy. In other words, greater psychological awareness. As anxiety affects them to a huge extent it heightened their sensitivity to the energies around them. As one of the respondents argued:

“Even if I do not want to get better for myself, I want to get better for the people around me. because sometimes I do not care about myself, but I care about them. For example, when my university gives me anxiety, sometimes I just want to drop out and give up, but I do not because I do not want my parents to be let down. So, this caring feeling drives my anxiety to study. My concept is, I won’t let anxiety hurt me and other people around, it’s enough that it is affecting me. So, I do not want it to spread, I want to contain it and let it stay in one area. It’s about keeping others in mind, it outweighs the disorder.”

The final strength that three participants mentioned was being a *spiritual* person, that includes having spiritual beliefs, praying, or meditating. Some of the respondents conveyed that whenever they would feel anxious they would resort to praying for example, which aids with managing their anxieties. For some, spirituality eased their anxiety as demonstrated by the following quote:

“When something major happens that gives me anxiety, not the day-to-day inconveniences. When something happens, and it’s the source of my anxiety, I go pray, and still, anxiety is there for sure but I know for a fact that I’m being heard and seen and this minor

effect helps. Like we love to be heard by people let alone feeling heard by a higher power, it assures me that I am not going through it alone”.

As aforementioned, there were four various coping strategies shown by the 10 young adults that were interviewed. These strategies help them to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday functioning, which includes creating a routine, finding a distraction, and seeking professional help, and lastly engaging in breathing and physical exercises. Based on the interviews there were overall 10 strengths, which are considered as the core foundation of these strategies which consequently assists them to moderate their anxiety.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to answer the following question “*How do young adults use their strengths to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday life?*”. Overall, this is the first study that examined self-management strategies and strengths among young adults with anxiety. In light of the findings, it became apparent that each participant was able to mention numerous self-management strategies and strengths. These helped them to moderate their anxiety and regulate some physical and psychological impairments and it assisted in nourishing their well-being.

Amidst the interviews, self-management strategies were acknowledged that help them to cope with their excessive worrying and their agitated feelings. Self-management strategies play an integral part in mental health recovery (Patten et al., 2006). Although creating a routine as a self-managing strategy of anxiety has not been mentioned by previous literature, Lyall et al. (2018) show that individuals with increased daytime activity have better mental health, sleeping patterns, and are less prone to emotional distresses. Participants in this study have also identified similar results therefore, it could be argued that finding a distraction helps shift away from negative or unwanted thoughts. Another study was conducted on three groups one of

which was a patient of a generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) aimed to assess spatial orienting components of anxiety-related bias (Yien et al., 2015). Participants were shown faces with different expressions as well as a letter on a screen and were asked to identify the letter. The findings showed that the GAD group had the fastest disengagement from negative faces. A similar pattern of results was obtained by the participants in this study, when dealing with their thoughts, young adults tended to find a distraction a way to disengage from negative thought. It can be argued that creating a routine and finding a distraction helps young adults minimize their anxiety triggers and to control their thought processes respectively.

Also, a previous study has shown that the form of psychotherapy known as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is highly effective at treating anxiety disorders (Loerinc, 2015). Their results have shown that through CBT, psychologists help patients learn to identify and manage the triggers that contribute to their anxiety (Loerinc, 2015). A similar pattern of findings was align with this study's results, it was also recognized that young adults who seek psychological help sought to have a better understanding of their disorder and the irrational thoughts it elicits thereby feeling better however, the participants did not specify the type of therapy. It also has been shown that physical activity of at least 21 minutes a day to be an effective and common way in dealing with anxiety (Petruzzello, Landers, Hatfield, Kubitiz, & Salazar, 2012). Physical activity could also be a way of distraction as it could be used as a way to have "time-out" of their daily activities (Biddle, 2016). In line with this study's findings, participants have portrayed that physical activity supported them transform their anxiety into physical movements which regulated their anxiety levels.

To use self-management strategies, an infrastructure of strengths is vital. Comparing the set of strengths from young adults with studies focusing on mood and anxiety disorder patients, akin findings occurred. The study conducted by Villaggi et al. (2015) regarding mood and anxiety disorder patients, identified that engaging in social contact or spending time with

family and friends, is what they considered detrimental to their well-being. These findings are in accordance with this study's results when comparing the most frequent strength that was mentioned by this study's participants was being communicative. They portrayed that talking to friends and family is their main source of managing their anxiety, it assists them to moderate their apprehensions. Another study conducted in Australia found that talking about mental health to one's close network neutralizes one's absurd thoughts (Holmes, 2016). A study conducted by George and Stopa (2008) found that people with high levels of anxiety tend to have better self-awareness of themselves and also of others, consequently helping one understand oneself and one's triggers to moderate their anxiety (George & Stopa, 2008). The literature seems to align with this study's findings as most participants named self-awareness as a strength. Hence, it could be argued that the participant's self-awareness makes them realize when they are anxious and thus can better deal with it.

An important aspect of being self-aware is being kind to oneself, with anxiety's irrational thoughts, the ability to positively affirm oneself assists in coping with anxiety. A prior study was conducted to examine self-compassion and psychological resilience among adolescents and young adults (Neff & McGejee, 2010). The study's results indicated that self-compassion and resilience were strongly associated with increased well-being among them. They have also demonstrated that both strengths may be an effective intervention target for young adults suffering from negative self-views because accepting one's anxiety embodies their ability to mentally and emotionally cope with their anxiety which, consequently, portrays their resilience towards it (Neff & McGejee, 2010). These findings are directly in line with this study, being kind to oneself and being resilient, were two strengths that convey positive significance in the wellbeing of the young adults. A couple of participants have also mentioned that acceptance or reconciliation with their situation has helped them understand and cope better with their anxiety. Acceptance as a strategy has been shown to decrease anxiety levels,

as it is thought to change the emotional stimulus caused by anxiety and how one interprets it (Hofmann, Heering, Sawyer, & Asnaani, 2009).

Another study showed that when participants with anxiety replaced negative ideas with positive ones, their worry-related thoughts significantly decreased (Eagelson, Hayes, Mathews, Perman, & Hirsch, 2016). This could explain why having a positive outlook and being growth-oriented helps young adults with their anxiety, as they go through a process of replacing destructive and negative thoughts with positive ones. Even though participants identified creativity as one of their strengths, Silvia and Kimbrel (2010) demonstrated that anxiety failed to predict creativity. This means that patients with anxiety are not necessarily creative. However, Grossman (1981) discusses that art is a therapeutic method for calming the chaotic thought process that anxiety causes by creating a smaller environment in which one has more control over, which in turn might decrease anxiety. In line with this study's findings, it has been conveyed that being empathetic is related to anxiety indirectly through worrying which is directly related to anxiety and empathy (Knight, Stoica, Fogleman, & Depue, 2019). It might be that participants worry about others and, thus, focus on others' distress which might in turn help them shift their focus away from their anxiety. However, when it comes to spirituality's effect on anxiety the evidence is confounding. To that day, many studies did not find a significant correlation between spirituality and anxiety, but other studies found that positive religious coping strategies as going to church were associated with lower anxiety levels (Agorastos, Demiralay, & Huber, 2014). According to them, spirituality seemed to ease their anxiety by giving something else to focus on.

As aforementioned, the foundation of both strengths and self-management strategies enhances one's health and well-being (Kristjansdottir et al., 2018). Ultimately, strengths can endeavor independently or as an establishment for self-management strategies to produce positive health-related behaviors. The outcome will certainly improve one's well-being

(Kristjansdottir et al., 2018). Young adults who experience anxiety declare akin enhancements when implementing their strengths and self-management strategies. Particularly, the use of strengths helps them cope with their experience with their anxiety, and the use of the self-management strategies assists them to moderate their everyday struggles challenges.

Strengths and limitations

The foremost strength of the following research results is filling the literature gap by exploring the self-management strategies and strengths applied by young adults with anxiety. When searching for literature, strengths, and self-management strategies for different mood disorders was explored, yet, only one study investigated mood and anxiety disorders (Villaggi et al., 2015). However, there was no applicable research that examined them among young adults, which adds to the uniqueness of this study's result. As young adults show the highest prevalence rate among anxiety disorders, these results add insight into how they cope and manage it in their everyday life. Hence, this knowledge could be integrated into therapies for young adults as the self-management strategies and strengths showed in this study portrayed a positive impact on their well-being. The results have supported that self-management strategies and one's strengths can improved their well-being, hence, psychologists can help instigate it within them.

Furthermore, this study focused on a highly sensitive topic, especially during this frightening time. Hence, certain conditions were established to increase the openness of the young adults. All the participants were from an extended circle of the interviewer. Thus, the participants, previously, knew the interviewer and were familiar with her to an extent. Thereby, this aided in increasing their comfort, and their willingness to talk. This led to the participants recognizing their self-management strategies and strengths and, thereby, aiding them to have a positive outlook in this global outbreak. However, that resulted in one of this study's limitations, as the convenience samples were somehow homogenous in terms of nationality

and gender. Hence, future research should replicate this study by having a broader and heterogeneous sample.

It is important to note that one limitation of this study, was the time it was conducted in, which was during the global pandemic of the year 2020, COVID 19. While conducting the interviews, the interviewees were more prone to express their frustration and their apprehensions towards the pandemic rather than focusing on their strengths. The COVID-19 outbreak took an emotional toll on young adults. Therefore, repeating the following study at better times might produce different and more intensive results. However, after conducting the interviews all participants sent the researcher an email, expressing how this study helped them remember their strengths which consequently eased a part of their anxiety.

For future research, the importance of self-management strategies and strengths should be further investigated with individuals who experience anxiety, and the influence both aspects have on another. Particularly in the young adults' population as it enhances their wellbeing from early on. Another recommendation would be to examine self-management strategies and strengths separately and their impact on their daily lives. As currently, the world is amid a global pandemic, the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 is tremendous; those experiencing anxiety are some of the most vulnerable as it makes it easy to spiral out into overwhelming dread and panic (Lee, 2020). The current pandemic has heightened uncertainty among young adults, thereby this study gives distinctive insight on how they cope with anxiety during a pandemic. As there is no prior research that examines the impact of self-management strategies and strengths among young adults with anxiety, a recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study in normal times and comparison should be done. As this study was conducted in unusual timing, replicating it in normal times might show difference in self-management strategies and strengths that they implement in their 'normal' daily lives while coping with anxiety.

Conclusion

This study explored the strengths used to self-manage the everyday life of young adults. These strengths were either used autonomously or as an establishment of self-management strategies. Also, the implications of these strengths were investigated regarding the impact on their wellbeing. One of the most compelling results of this study was identifying four distinctive self-management strategies stated by a similar number of participants, hence, these strategies are equally significant when coping with anxiety (creating a routine, finding a distraction, seeking professional help, and engaging in physical and breathing exercises). Overall, these strategies help young adults self-manage their anxiety triggers in their everyday life and to control their thought processes respectively. Another key point young adults conveyed is that being communicative, self-aware, and being kind to oneself were the most remarkable strengths. In fact, they use these strengths to adapt to their life towards their anxiety and facilitate in maintaining their well-being.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

PROJECT TITLE

The Strengths Used by Young Adults to Cope with their Anxiety

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled: The Strengths Used by Young Adults to Cope with their Anxiety. This research is conducted by Lina Abdelaziz a third-year Bachelor student at the University of Twente. The purpose of this research project is to be able to identify and assess your strengths and how they help you self-manage anxiety.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You are free to ask any questions before or after taking part in the experiment.

PROCEDURES

You will participate in an interview lasting 30 to 60 minutes. You will be asked questions about your situation and how you are currently feeling, then about the strengths that help you cope with anxiety in your everyday life. Strengths could be defined as attributes or characteristics that help you cope and manage your anxiety, and aids in obtaining or maintaining your well-being.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no obvious physical, legal or economic risks associated with participating in this study. Still, it is a sensitive topic and therefore some discomfort might come up while answering questions regarding this topic. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to discontinue your participation at any time. Furthermore, a third person close to you can assist during the interview, when personal discomforts are coming up. This should give you a safe environment, to make this interview as comfortable as possible.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Participation in this study does not guarantee any beneficial results for you. As a result of participating, you may better understand what resources and strengths you have while coping with anxiety and that you are still using to cope in your everyday life. The broader goal of this research is to get to know the strengths and self-management strategies of young adults to cope with the consequences of anxiety.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Your privacy will be protected to the maximum extent allowable by law. No personally identifiable information will be reported in any research product. Moreover, only trained

research staff will have access to your responses yet the responses will still be anonymized. Within these restrictions, the results of this study will be made available to you upon request. At the start of the research, your name will be replaced by a pseudonym; your name will be coded. As indicated above, this research project involves making audio recordings of interviews with you. Transcribed anonymized segments from the audio recordings will be used in my research report. The audio recording will be saved by the researcher and will be destroyed after finishing the study.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AND QUESTIONS

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time without any given reason. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. The data you provided before you stopped participating will be destroyed upon your request.

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente by ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the primary investigator:

Name	Email Address
Lina Abdelaziz:	l.m.d.abdelaziz@student.utwente.nl

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree that you will participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.

I agree to participate in a research project led by Lina Abdelaziz. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project by being interviewed.

1. I have been given sufficient information about this research project. The purpose of my participation as an interviewee in this project has been explained to me and is clear.
2. My participation as an interviewee in this project is voluntary. There is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
3. Participation involves being interviewed by Lina Abdelaziz from the University of Twente. The interview will last approximately 30-60 minutes. I allow the researcher to take written

notes during the interview. I also may allow the recording (by audio/videotape) of the interview. It is clear to me that in case I do not want the interview to be taped I am at any point of time fully entitled to withdraw from participation.

4. I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.

5. I have been given the explicit guarantees that, the researcher will not identify me by name or function in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Also, any transcribed quotes will be anonymized or pseudonyms will be used.

6. I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the faculty of Psychology and by the BMS Ethics Committee. For research problems or any other question regarding the research project, the Secretary of the Ethics Commission of the faculty Behavioral, Management, and Social Sciences at University Twente may be contacted through ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl.

7. I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature.	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date

Appendix B

Interview Scheme

INTRODUCTION

- Hi, first I would like to welcome and thank you for participating in my study. My name is Lina Abdelaziz, I am 20 years old and a third-year psychology bachelor student. Currently, I am working on my bachelor thesis which aims to answer the question '*How do young adults use their strengths to self-manage their anxiety in their everyday life?*'
- The purpose of this interview is to be able to identify and assess your strengths and self-management strategies that you use in your daily life to cope with your anxiety. Overall, **strengths** can be characterized as personal characteristics and qualities which are incorporated into various approaches, to obtain and maintain well-being, for instance, courage, empathy, etc.
- The interview will be divided into **three** sections, first I will ask you about your background information, then I would like to ask some questions on your current situation, then we will shift to talk about your self-management strategies and your strengths. Please feel free to ask for a break if it's needed, and you have the right not to answer the questions if you feel uncomfortable in any way. During the interview, I will try to let you speak freely about the topic and will interrupt you as little as possible. If I need some more specific information, I will try to ask these in certain questions.
- Before we get started, I would like to remind you regarding the information stated in the informed consent. This interview will be recorded and transcribed anonymously to analyze and code your given information. The interview will take from 30-60 minutes, and you can stop the interview at any given time without further explanation. I want to stress that all your data will be treated with confidentiality, and all personal data will be anonymized. Also, I would like to emphasize that some of your quotes will be used in the report, but no third party will know which answers you gave.

1- BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

To start the interview, I would like you to introduce yourself.

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- What is your family status?

- What is your employment status?

2- CURRENT HEALTH SITUATION AND CHALLENGES

Could you give me also some information about your current situation?

- How do you feel right now?
- Can you please tell me what type of anxiety do you have?
- For how long have you had anxiety?
- Can you tell me more about what kind of problems or challenges do you face in your daily life because of anxiety?
 - How do you cope with these problems?
- How is it living with anxiety?
 - What is going well?
 - What do you find difficult?
 - How do you cope with this?
 - Which things are helping you?
- What areas of life would you say are most affected by your anxiety?
 - How do these affect you?
 - How do you cope with it?
- What are the consequences of your anxiety?
 - What personal characteristics that help you cope with it?

3- STRENGTHS AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

You mentioned that certain things help you cope with your anxiety. Could you be a bit more specific regarding these?

Maybe refer it a bit towards strengths?

- What kind of strengths helps you?
 - I could repeat the definition of strengths if you want, also I have some examples of strengths here in cards that could help you.
 - Could you tell me some examples of how these strengths help you deal with anxiety?
- What about your surroundings do they help you? (like your friends/family, environment)
- Do you have self-management strategies that help you cope with anxiety?
- What about when you are anxious, what usually helps?

- What especially helps you? What would you describe as your biggest strength or resource?
- How does it play a role in coping with anxiety?
- Did you use specific strengths, resources, or strategies to cope with these problems?

Before I end this interview, do you have any additional information that you might have forgotten during the interview?

- I gained a lot of insights during this interview, I would like to thank you so much for taking part in my study. Please feel free to ask me any questions, if you have any. You can also contact me at any time if you had questions you could find my email address in the informed consent that you signed beforehand. Thank you so much again for taking the time to participate in my study!

Appendix C

Extended Coding Scheme

Category	Code	Definitions	Frequency N.	Quotation
Self- management Strategies	Creating a Routine	Having a fixed but not a rigid schedule	7	R8 “I have been trying to have a routine for myself since the start of quarantine, I have been trying to keep my anxiety to a manageable level”
	Find a distraction	Having one’s attention drawn away from the negative thoughts	7	R10: “I try my best to distract myself, watching something, or playing video games, reading, and sort of distraction helps”
	Therapy/Seeking Professional Help	Seeking professional help and therapies	7	R2: “Also, I started accepting therapy and seeking professional help, talking to someone that actually understands and takes anxiety seriously has helped a lot.”
	Breathing Exercises/ Physical Activity	Being active and doing breathing exercise to calm their anxiety	6	R4: “Whenever I would feel anxious I would do a breathing exercise or going for a little walk to calm myself down.”
Strengths	Communicative	Being articulate about their thoughts and apprehensions	9	R3: “Talking to someone that’s level headed and not as anxious as I give me perspective on the situation which eases my anxiety”

Extended Coding Scheme Continued

Category	Code	Definitions	Frequency N.	Quotation
	Self-awareness	Understanding oneself and one's triggers	8	R1: "I'm pretty level-headed, I always try to remain calm and I'm super self-aware with anxiety so I'm always aware when I'm going to get anxious so I try as much as I can to remain calm and to manage it."
	Being kind to oneself	Being able to positively affirm oneself	6	R4: "It's about constant reminders, telling myself that it is okay and to cut myself some slack."
	Resilience	The ability to mentally and emotionally cope with anxiety	6	R2: "I'm also resilient and because I have had anxiety for so long I don't let it take as much control of my life as much as it used to."
	Acceptance	Reconciling oneself with the situation and coming to terms with one's anxiety	6	R10: "I have accepted my anxiety, have accepted its limitations and weaknesses, and that has helped with it as well."
	Having a positive outlook	Being optimistic and hopeful of positive outcomes	5	R6: "Having a positive outlook sometimes, reminding myself of how good things are."
	Goal-oriented	Having a growth mindset	4	R5: "I have the growth mindset always and self-awareness. I am always aware of what triggers my anxiety and my emotions towards it, and I am ready to move on and find ways to help myself."

Extended Coding Scheme Continued

Category	Code	Definitions	Frequency N.	Quotation
	Creativity	The use of imagination or original ideas to create something that eases one's anxiety	3	R8: "Lately, doodling or drawing some sort of self-expression, letting myself be creative it helps."
	Caring	Taking care of others	3	R9: "Taking care of the people around me, I do not give it the power to affect my relationship with people or how I feel towards them."
	Spirituality	Having spiritual beliefs	3	R5: "I am a very special ritual person, I pray when I feel anxious, of course that, does not mean that my anxiety goes away I just feel heard and it gives me serenity."