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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**Education Advisors' Experiences of Stress and Coping in the Virtual Working Environment**

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**ABSTRACT**

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, most education advisors were forced to work from home, and continuous stress may lay negative impacts on educators' work performance and psychological state. However, there are rare studies on stress whilst working virtually for education advisors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, understanding stress in the virtual working environment is important to support them to cope. Underpinned by Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping*, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was conducted. Following snowball sampling, 12 participants (Male=7, Female=5,  $M_{age}=31.74$ ) from the UK and China were interviewed. The six phases of thematic analysis were employed to analyze the data. The study identified the sources of education advisors' stress from colleagues, clients, families, and personal levels that laid negative consequences on their work and life. A series of problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies, such as boundary management, were raised for them to cope. The findings highlighted the education advisors' stress experiences and raised practical coping strategies at personal, organizational, and family levels to defend against the stressors whilst working virtually, and contributes to understanding how they dynamically appraise the stressors from a transactional process perspective within the virtual working environment.

**KEYWORDS**

Stress coping, Transactional theory, Thematic analysis, Work performance, Pandemic lockdown

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**1. Introduction**

Education advisor (EA) advises on students' academic and comprehensive performance, then customizes a study plan or educational program (e.g., language camp) for them (retrieved from Learn.org, 13/06/2022). EAs act as coordinators among teachers, students, and sales of the educational institutions. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, most EAs were given no choice except working from home (WFH). Hence, their occupational stress has shifted from conventional offices to home-based environments. Among the claims of the advantages of home-working, Melnyk et al. (2020) reveal higher stress whilst working virtually, including anxiety on physiological and psychological health, the increasing possibility of economic recession, unemployment, as well as 'Zoom exhaustion'. Fan et al. (2015) also argue that although WFH increases flexibility for employees to manage work and family issues, it brings in longer working hours, increasing workloads and the intrusion of work into family life. Moreover, WFH brings challenges for employees in seeking appropriate space for working, accessing work equipment, securing reliable internet (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020), and juggling job and family commitments, including monitoring children's learning, exercise, and recreation (Patterson, 2012, p.9; Etheridge et al., 2020).

Melnyk et al. (2020) used the Likert Scale to assess the impact on the physical and mental health of both educators and students ( $n=216$ ). 48% of respondents reported the impact as 'negative' and 'very negative'. Hence, continuous stress whilst working virtually may engender negative impacts on both educators' professional performance and well-being (Hughes et al., 2019). For example, occupational stress has been found to cause a series of psychological or cognitive issues (e.g., frustration, job insecurity) (Fan et al., 2015) and emotional issues (e.g., depression, burnout) (Szalma & Hancock, 2018, p.149; McIntyre et

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al., 2017). Furthermore, continuous stress may be associated with minimal coping behaviors such as spending less time in work preparation, undertaking fewer responsibilities, investing less energy in work, fulfilling clients' needs reluctantly (Hughes et al., 2019), and resulting in higher turnover (Fan et al., 2015).

Therefore, understanding stress within the lockdown environment and identifying stresses caused by restricted home-working are important to support EAs to cope effectively.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical lens

There are a number of theoretical approaches to understanding stress. Lazarus and Launier (1978) define stress as 'an issue in which environmental or internal demands (or both) exceed the adaptive resources of an individual, organizational or social system' (p.296). Contemporary research regards stress as a relational concept, that is, a transactional relationship between individuals and their environment (Lazarus, 1991).

According to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping*, stress appraisal is a transactional variable depending on the interactions between the individual and the environment, both of which are constantly changing variables, resulting in changing interactions too. From this transactional process perspective, the emotional experience is emphasized by Lazarus (1999). An individual may effectively cope with the environment by appraising different situations (i.e., potential stressors) and selecting appropriate coping strategies. Specifically, the coping process follows the appraisal process and the emotional experience (Poirel & Yvon, 2014). See Figure 1. Based on Lazarus and Folkman's transactional theory, it is argued that the COVID-19 outbreak is likely perceived as an influential yet uncontrollable event, which increases the possibility that the situation is experienced as harmful or threatening. In such an uncertain and challenging environment, employees' psychological state is presumably negatively affected, and this may also spill over to and become visible in the work domain (Syrek et al., 2021).

Regarding work-related stress, Cevenini et al. (2012) divide it into work role, structure and climate, growth and sensibility, interpersonal relationships, work-life balance and fulfillment. Therefore, under the circumstances of transitioned workplace, it is necessary to reinterpret EAs' stress and to cope within this new transactional relationship, and it is important to understand how their stress and appraisal interplay in the virtual working environment.

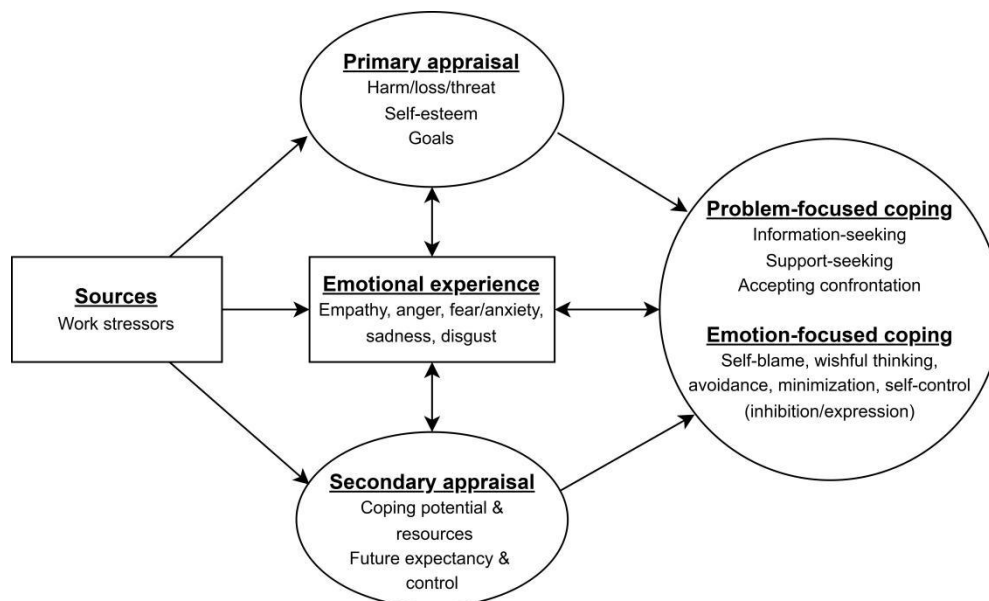


Figure 1: Emotional-Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (Poirel & Yvon, 2014)

### 2.2 Sources of Stress in the virtual working environment

There is very little understanding of the sources of EAs' stress whilst working virtually. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the sources identified by McIntyre et al. (2017) would be relevant. For example, of particular relevance to working virtually during

the COVID-19 would be drastic organizational changes, blurred boundaries between work and life, deteriorated relationships with colleagues and students, and so on.

### **2.2.1 Drastic organizational changes**

During the pandemic lockdown, educational companies had to transform their business and service delivery pattern from offline to online. Consequently, EAs are forced to change, for example, moving offline academic coaching to online platforms. Such turbulent changes lead to increased responsibilities, over-burdened workloads, and more complicated and demanding work roles. Therefore, such role conflict (i.e., conflicting task demands) and role ambiguity (i.e., ambiguous task descriptions) result in the descending of self-efficacy (McIntyre et al., 2017), higher stress and burnout (Melnik et al., 2020; Shernoff et al., 2011). Besides, it is found that employees who experience more work autonomy whilst working virtually embrace gratitude to their employers (Syrek et al., 2021). However, Anderson and Kelliher (2020) argue that such outcomes may not be found under the condition that employees are enforced to WFH for long. Hence, this research discrepancy will be explored in our research.

### **2.2.2 Blurred boundaries between work and life**

As COVID-19 accelerates the trend of virtual working, the blurred boundaries between work and life become a stressor for employees. Employees may not have a private room for work, so they may struggle with conflicting roles and are discontented with the work-life imbalance. Meanwhile, during the workplace transition, employees will have to adapt to the home-based working environment, develop new work routines, grasp various IT technologies, and possibly look after children. Therefore, the mixed boundaries may also become an important variable in predicting stress for them (Syrek et al., 2021).

### **2.2.3 Deteriorated relationships with colleagues and students**

Colleague relationship is an important predictor of educators' stress and anxiety (Warren, 2017). Evidence suggests that social support from colleagues and supervisors provides a strong buffer against stress, and facilitates mutual trust, better relationships and job commitment (Thomsen et al., 2015).

The educator-student relationship is also an important source of educators' stress (Warren, 2017). During the lockdown, the lack of face-to-face interaction inhibits effective communication and causes difficulties in building up mutual trust between educators and parents (Thompson et al., 2021). Moreover, Kurdi and Archambault (2018) have found that students' (n=315) emotions can be contagious to educators and cause greater stress for educators. Therefore, EAs may also encounter a similar difficulty, especially when daily communication has been transitioned to a home-based virtual environment, where a professional image is hard to be built or maintained. It will be explored in our study.

## **2.3 Stress Coping**

Since it is likely that EAs have perceived WFH during the lockdown as stressful, understanding how EAs have coped with this situation would be beneficial. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished two basic coping categories, i.e., emotion-focused and problem-focused coping, as responses aimed at 'regulating emotional responses to the problem' and 'managing the problem causing the distress' respectively (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p.150). Later on, Stanistawski (2019) identified 13 categories of coping, which are summarized in Table 1 (See next page).

Table 1: Definitions of coping strategies from the COPE (Stanistawski, 2019)

COPING CATEGORY	DEFINITION
<b>PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING</b>	
Active coping	Process of taking active steps to try to remove or circumvent the stressor or to ameliorate its effects. Active coping includes initiating direct action, increasing one's efforts, and trying to execute a coping attempt in stepwise fashion.
Planning	Thinking about how to cope with a stressor. Planning involves coming up with action strategies, thinking about what steps to take and how best to handle the problem.
Suppression of competing activities	Putting other projects aside, trying to avoid becoming distracted by other events, even letting other things slide, if necessary, to deal with the stressor.
Restraint coping	Waiting until an appropriate opportunity to act presents itself, holding oneself back, and not acting prematurely.
Seeking social support for instrumental	Seeking advice, assistance, or information.
<b>EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING</b>	
Seeking social support for emotional	Getting moral support, sympathy, or understanding.
Positive reinterpretation and growth	Construing a stressful transaction in positive terms.
Acceptance	Learning to accept the reality of a stressful situation.
Denial	Reports of refusal to believe that the stressor exists or trying to act as though the stressor is
Turning to religion	Tendency to turn to religion in times of stress.
<b>LESS USEFUL</b>	
Focus on and venting of emotions	The tendency to focus on whatever distress or upset one is experiencing and to ventilate those
Behavioral disengagement	Reducing one's effort to deal with the stressor, even giving up the attempt to attain goals with which the stressor is interfering.
Mental disengagement	Wide variety of activities that serve to distract the person from thinking about the behavioral dimension or goal with which the stressor is interfering, e.g., daydreaming, watching TV, escaping through sleep.

### 2.3.1 Emotion-focused coping

Research has shown that emotion-focused coping can moderate the relationship between sources of stress and consequences (Richter et al., 2013). For example, Richter et al. (2013) utilized a cross-sectional survey to analyze the moderating effects of different coping strategies on 579 Swedish accountants. The research attests that high emotion-focused coping weakens the relationship between job insecurity and some negative consequences (e.g., job dissatisfaction, turnover intention, and mental ill-health). Moreover, Pas et al. (2012) verify that emotion-focused coping mediates maladaptive perfectionism and burnout. Their finding may provide beneficial coping strategies for EAs working virtually. Furthermore, to alleviate emotional exhaustion and develop resilience in work, Hughes et al. (2019), Anderson and Kelliher (2020) raise a series of emotion-focused coping strategies, such as developing self-confidence, tolerating ambiguity, avoiding burnout, acceptance and mindfulness, etc.

### 2.3.2 Problem-focused coping

#### 2.3.2.1 Active coping-boundary management

There are a number of approaches to problem-focused coping. When WFH, it is probable that blurred boundaries between work and home life may be stressful. Therefore, an approach that may be relevant to coping is boundary management. Ahrentzen (1990) categorizes boundaries into the spatial boundary, temporal boundary (i.e., working time-slot), and socio-behavioral boundary (i.e., mental boundary) and studies the degree of overlap between work and family roles among these three boundaries. Research results demonstrate considerable inter-correlations among spatial, temporal and mental overlaps. For instance, relatives stepping into the workspace in a working time slot constitutes a breach of both spatial and temporal boundaries. Such disturbance is possibly also a breach of mental boundaries, as EAs are likely to lose concentration on work. Therefore, boundary management might be a potential coping approach, given what has been found in the literature.

#### 2.3.2.2 Flexible planning and autonomy

Flexible planning and autonomy in work have shown positive implications for employees, particularly working mothers, as it helps them to accommodate family issues without incurring penalties (Yemisi et al., 2020). Moreover, many beneficial outcomes, such as higher self-efficacy and work-life balance found for employees, are associated with feelings of greater autonomy in exercising flexible work arrangements (Perrigino et al., 2018, p.606).

## 2.4 Research gap

In general, current research on stress whilst working virtually are sparse for different occupations. However, there are no studies on stress whilst working virtually for EAs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, since the workplace has been transitioned to home-based, EAs must adapt quickly under a backdrop of uncertainty and the resultant stress. Therefore, it is imperative to reinterpret the stress under the transactional relationship between them and the home-based working

environment. And it is now more important than ever to identify and overcome the challenges and stresses that such populations ever face so that we can learn how to be more adaptive and accepting of uncertainties in life. In this way, such stresses might be avoided or mitigated whilst working virtually in future pandemic lockdowns.

### 2.5 Research Questions

1. What are the sources of stress for EAs whilst working virtually during the pandemic lockdown?
2. What are the consequences of stress on EAs whilst working virtually during the pandemic lockdown?
3. What are the coping strategies for EAs whilst working virtually during the pandemic lockdown?

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Participants

The participants of our study were full-time EAs working virtually in the employment of different educational organizations during the pandemic lockdown. Since the pandemic has been globally influencing EAs' work-life patterns, the participants were recruited from a western-context country (i.e., the UK) and an Asian-context country (i.e., China) to develop a more comprehensive understanding of EAs' stress within this global circumstance. To ensure the eligibility criteria of the study, the participants were all professionals in the educational consulting field with at least three years of experience and are accredited by the British Council or similar reputable educational institutions. Seven participants are males, and five participants are females. The participants were aged from 26 to 39 years old. Six of them have maternity or childcare obligations whilst working virtually. Besides, their names were coded with pseudonyms (e.g., UK1, CN1). Regarding the sample size, Blair and Conrad (2011) conduct empirical research to attest that interviews with a sample size of ten to twenty are eligible and sufficient to reveal the dominant problems in the research subject. Therefore, taking into account of our research aim, sample specificity, and data analysis strategy, twelve EAs were recruited in total.

### 3.2 Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the research data. Draganova & Seidman (2015) contend that the semi-structured interview helps facilitate exploring interviewees' experiences, perspectives, and values on the research subjects. As the main approach of qualitative research, it offers guidance to both the interviewer and interviewees on what to capture and deliver and gives room for elaboration (Stuckey, 2013). For this reason, some thoughts which are not identified in previous research but are important to the research questions might be discovered (Vukojević, 2016). The semi-structured interview deepens the understanding and insight of the research questions probing for clarification because the interviewer can ask follow-up probing questions to the interviewees on any particular matter of interest (Scanlan, 2020). Therefore, it is consistent with our research aim and deemed appropriate to employ in our research.

Based on our research aim, and Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory, we developed a bespoke semi-structured *Interview Schedule* drawing reference from stress-related literature (e.g., Cevenini et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2019). The interview questions were designed and justified to understand the sources, consequences and coping of EAs' stress whilst working virtually during the lockdown. The interview schedule included an ice breaker question, several core questions (e.g., Can you tell me about situations you have found challenging and stressful whilst working virtually?), as well as some probing questions with prompts for encouraging elaboration or clarification (e.g., Do you feel easier or harder to complete your daily tasks whilst working virtually, and why?). Herein, the ice breaker question facilitated building up a trustful relationship and creating a pleasant atmosphere for interviews, and the prompts helped maintain a balance between the research questions and some unexpectedly delivered information so that the interviews could be navigated in the right direction. Following two pilot interviews, the interview questions were refined to enhance the question flow and question rationality. Then ten formal interviews were conducted in total.

### 3.3 Procedures

Before the commencement of the research, ethical approval was received from the Ethics Committee of Moray House School of Education and Sport and the University of Edinburgh. To recruit participants, the snowballing sampling method was employed.

Although selection bias and insufficient generalizability are seen as the potential pitfall of the snowball sampling method, its flexibility and convenience in approaching dispersed participants geographically in small samples are advocated by researchers (Parker et al., 2020). Therefore, it is considered appropriate to recruit the EA samples, particularly in such a global pandemic and a virtual environment. All participants were sent the *Participants Information Sheet* detailing the purpose of the research, the information aimed to collect and process, the potential risks and benefits to the participants, etc. They were asked for formal consent with the *Participant Consent Form* through emails before conducting the interview. The interviews were conducted and recorded in English or Chinese via Microsoft-Teams® and then uploaded to Microsoft-Streams® for transcription. Each interview lasts 45-60 minutes. For the interviews conducted in Chinese, the transcripts were translated into

English verbatim. The EAs chose wherever they felt private, quiet, and comfortable to take the interview. The data were coded, analyzed and finally stored in Microsoft OneDrive. After the research, an interview outcome and relevant feedback will be prepared as a document and offered to each participant.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis (TA) was employed as the data analysis method. TA is a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of themes within a qualitative data-set in relation to certain predetermined research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). With accessible and systematic procedures, TA is popular and distinctive for analyzing qualitative data from individual or group experiences to study a wide range of topics in social science (Byrne, 2021). Flexibility is one of the most commendable advantages of TA -not only in theoretical flexibility but also in research questions, sample size and constitution, data collection, and approaches to theme development (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Therefore, in a reflexive stance, TA helps to probe into and interpret EAs' stress experiences whilst working virtually.

Within a qualitative paradigm, TA emphasizes an organic approach to coding and theme development, which embraces six phases (Clarke & Braun, 2017). First, the transcribed data were noted down, categorized, and familiarized. For example, the sources, consequences and coping of EAs' stress whilst working virtually were categorized into three files respectively for the researcher to familiarize and generate initial ideas. Second, the interesting features of the data within each category were identified, coded and collated. With different colors, we visualized the data and coded them in consistency at a hierarchical level to assess the meaning. Third, the coded and collated data were tried to form into potential sub-themes and overarching themes in similar underlying concepts. During the latter stage of this phase, in-depth discussions were undertaken with two critical friends (i.e., research buddy peers) to ensure that the way we grouped the data was consistent with the participants' original perspectives. This also helped to enhance the coherence between the raw data and our interpretation. Fourth, the themes were further reviewed to form a thematic map. Fifth, once we captured the themes among our coding, the specifics of each theme were defined to generate clear definitions and names, respectively. Finally, a scholarly report relating to our research questions was produced (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **4. Results**

From the data, three overarching themes were identified: 1) the sources of EAs' stress from the external and personal environment; 2) the consequences of EAs' stress on work and life, and 3) the problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies whilst working virtually. The themes are presented using clear definitions with supporting quotes from the EAs. To protect their identities, the data are presented with pseudonyms and some contextual information is removed. Due to space constraints, the results presented were posited to be the key results that applied to most of the EAs. Some individual cases or minor aspects of the findings were not to be described, as they were deemed hard to be generalized to the mass EA populations.

### **Theme 1: Sources of stress from external and personal environment**

This theme is defined as the interacting factors and sources of stress, including physical, cognitive, emotional, and social conditions of the educational consulting environment, that cause the EAs to be vulnerable to experiencing stress whilst working virtually. Table 2 illustrates four sub-themes identified: stressors from colleagues, stressors from clients, stressors from families, and personal stressors. See Table 2 for the theme construction in detail coding.

Table 2: Sources of stress from the external and personal environment

Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
(1) Hard to realize colleagues' reactions or real opinions	1. Stressors from colleagues	Sources of stress from external and personal environment
(2) Hard to coordinate and reconcile the time		
(3) Absence of colleagues' feedback loop		
(4) Repetitive work		
(5) Insufficient facilities and unreliable internet		
(1) Hard to get new clients' trust	2. Stressors from clients	
(2) Isolated by clients' stealth mode		
(3) Intermittent interruptions by online chatting apps		
(1) Things mix up due to blurred boundaries	3. Stressors from families	
(2) Hard to balance work and life		
(3) Burdensome in preparing meals and eating together everyday		
(4) More conflicts and negative emotions		
(1) Low self-discipline to complete daily tasks	4. Personal stressors	
(2) Larger stress for EAs with childcare responsibility, especially for female		

### **Sub-theme 1: Stressors from colleagues**

Five codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Hard to realize colleagues' reactions or real opinions. Most EAs highlighted it is quite challenging when discussing job issues in a virtual environment, as it is hard to recognize peers' reactions and emotions and cannot realize whether they really agree on something. (2) Hard to coordinate and reconcile the time. UK4 stated, 'the coronavirus changes quickly, so we don't know peers' updated situations. They may be late or miss the calendar when meeting online. It is a waste of time that I have to compromise the time slots of different parties to arrange conferences. (3) Absence of colleagues' feedback loop. UK6 said, 'while working virtually, you don't have feedback from colleagues you will normally have. Everything gets quieter. When urgent things happen, you realize that there is an absence of colleagues who will understand you and provide input and support.' (4) Repetitive work. Many EAs complained that they must send duplicated emails to different parties and remind them of the important issues ever mentioned. When meeting online, they must repetitively remind colleagues of what is going on. Some EAs also argued that they needed to do more report work to supervisors and spend more time explaining things. This is quite stressful. (5) Insufficient facilities and unreliable internet.

### **Sub-theme 2: Stressors from clients**

Three codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Hard to get new clients' trust. Many EAs reflected that it is hard to build a professional image to get new clients' trust if just speaking with them virtually. Clients (e.g., students' parents) might think the EAs' suggestions are just out of their interests. (2) Isolated by clients' stealth mode. UK1 raised, 'most students will close their cameras, so it is hard to get their true feelings, and it makes me feel cut off from them.' (3) Intermittent interruptions by online chatting apps. This was stressed by many Chinese EAs. UK5 also said, 'constant use of emoji to keep a friendly signal to clients makes me stressful.'

### **Sub-theme 3: Stressors from families**

Four codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Things mix up due to blurred boundaries and interruptions from EAs' parents, partners, children, and pets. The family chores make them feel perplexed and upset at work. (2) Hard to balance work-life. For example, UK3 stated, 'to do work well while handling family issues, I usually have to finish my backlog after my son falls asleep.' (3) Burdensome in preparing meals and eating together everyday. Many Chinese EAs reflected that their parents or wives are accustomed to making meals and eating together on time, causing them to feel stressed and disturbed on busy days. (4) More conflicts and negative emotions. 'Maybe we are usually more demanding to the closest ones,' said CN3.

### **Sub-theme 4: Personal stressors**

Two codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Low self-discipline to complete daily tasks. CN1 iterated, 'I never finished the schedule I made, as the lower self-discipline made it hard for me to concentrate whilst working virtually.' However, an approach for completing daily tasks easier is the use of clear boundary management, which was raised by several EAs. (2) Larger stress for the EAs with childcare obligations, particularly for female EAs.

## **Theme 2: Consequences of stress on work-life in the virtual working environment**

This theme is defined as the detrimental effects of stress on the EAs' work and life in the virtual working environment. The primitive stressors of these consequences originated from the mixed boundaries between work-life, lazy home nature, prolonged isolated working virtually, and the uncertain future. Table 3 illustrates three sub-themes identified: consequences on work, consequences of life, as well as mixed consequences on work-life.

Table 3: Consequences of stress on work-life for EAs whilst working virtually

Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
(1) Ineffective work due to the mixed boundaries at home	1. Consequences on work	Consequences of stress on work-life in the virtual working environment
(2) Hard to make decisions when it turns to team collaborations		
(3) Lower work performance due to less trust from new clients		
(4) Consider career break or career change		
(1) Low mood and depression due to prolonged isolated working virtually	2. Consequences on life	
(2) Tiredness, powerlessness, and burnout due to the lazy home nature		
(3) Want to escape from home and go back to office sometimes		
(1) Anxiety and job insecurity due to the uncertain future	3. Mixed consequences on work-life	
(2) Emotional contagion between EAs and clients, EAs and their families		

### **Sub-theme 1: Consequences on work**

Four codes were constructed within this sub-theme. Due to space constraints, the detailed discussion of the codes is limited to

examples to illustrate, such as ineffective and less productive in work due to the mixed boundaries at home. Participants reported stress that they felt ineffective and unproductive whilst working virtually. First, it showed no immersive working environment nor definite time limits on work-life. Second, the lazy home nature prolonged EAs' working hours and delayed things. UK6 said, 'I often can't help open my laptop after dinner because there is something on my mind.' Third, some EAs stressed that peers and even supervisors might delay or forget things.

**Sub-theme 2: Consequences on life**

Three codes were constructed within this sub-theme, for example, low mood and depression due to prolonged isolated working virtually. Almost every participant reported experiencing such emotions. The social isolation disabled EAs to do exercise and connect friends outside. CN1 recalled, 'I remembered a typical period that I felt depressed because I couldn't get enough sleep even if I had been sleeping the whole day. I didn't feel the urge to work.'

**Sub-theme 3: Mixed consequences on work-life**

Two codes were constructed within this sub-theme. For example, anxiety and job insecurity due to the uncertain future. Constant WFH made many participants feel no directions, no new ideas, and no sense of collaboration. It even influenced some participants' physical health. They worried the repeating lockdown would impact their life pattern for long and further impact their incomes. UK5 recalled, 'from January to March; I got so stressed. I always woke up at midnight, feeling that I had to get up and do something, from the anxiety that I was not making enough money. I ended up getting sick and got migraines and head colds, which made my nose stuffy. My mental stress became physical stress.'

**Theme 3: Problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies in the virtual working environment**

This theme is defined as the problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies for EAs whilst working virtually based on the transactional theory and the interview findings of the EAs' stress experiences. Table 4 illustrates five sub-themes identified.

Table 4: Problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies for EAs whilst working virtually

Codes	Sub-themes	Theme
(1) Boundary management (2) Set work priority with a checklist (3) Avoid social media (4) Employ relaxation response technique	1. Problem-focused coping strategies for EAs to handle self-work	Problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies in the virtual working environment
(1) Pose positive information to clients (2) Offer flexible schedule options to clients	2. Problem-focused coping strategies for EAs to handle clients	
(1) Create opportunities for teamwork to remove gaps (2) Create opportunities to talk with employees regularly (3) Offer work autonomy to the EAs (4) Initiate occupational training to the EAs	3. Problem-focused coping strategies for organizations	
(1) Positive reinterpretation (2) Seeking social support for emotional reasons (3) Turning to religion (4) Venting of emotions	4. Emotion-focused coping strategies for EAs	
(1) Acceptance (2) Understanding of each other	5. Emotion-focused coping strategies for families	

**Sub-theme 1: Problem-focused coping strategies for EAs to handle self-work**

Four codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Boundary management. For physical boundary, UK6 stated, 'I set up a working area at home, where I have a table with books and a professional image behind, and I will dress for work to construct a clear boundary between work-life and strengthen self-discipline'. For temporal boundary, UK2 and UK3 shared that they set working time slots. UK4 also proposed, 'I switch tasks in different time slots to make myself focus on each task.' (2) Set work priority with a checklist. (3) Avoid social media. Many EAs shared they put aside their mobile phones whilst working virtually. UK5 also said he would avoid listening to too much pop music, which might cause anxiety. (4) Employ relaxation response technique. For instance, both CN3 and UK6 mentioned they would do some gardening when they felt stressed whilst working virtually.

**Sub-theme 2: Problem-focused coping strategies for EAs to handle clients**

Two codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Pose positive information to clients. For example, to pose V-logs from existing students can help relieve parents' stress and anxiety. (2) Offer flexible schedule options to clients. UK2 said, 'we offer flexible booking, free cancellation and postponement options to clients. In this way, they have more confidence and patience in us, and we can enhance our work performance and bear less stress.'



### ***Sub-theme 3: Problem-focused coping strategies for organizations***

Four codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Create opportunities for teamwork to remove gaps. CN6 said, 'in this way, we still feel together, work together, and conquer the challenges together.' (2) Create opportunities to talk to employees regularly. CN6 added, 'they can feel safe and feel you are reliable. It is the most effective way to care about your colleagues during the lockdown.' (3) Offer work autonomy to the EAs. (4) Initiate occupational training to EAs. The average score of the EAs' rating for their company support (1-5 points) is merely 3.17, which means there was insufficient support to help alleviate EAs' stress whilst working virtually.

### ***Sub-theme 4: Emotion-focused coping strategies for EAs***

Four codes were constructed within this sub-theme. (1) Positive reinterpretation. UK5 recalled, 'the stress and physical state made me realize that maybe I need to change my attitude and outlook, practice gratitude more, be optimistic and figure out the changes that I needed to make in my daily life.' (2) Seeking social support for emotional reasons. (3) Turning to religion. UK1 said, 'I am a Christian. During the lockdown, I take the initiative to edit our church's videos and maintain our channel on YouTube. It helps me feel like I'm doing something meaningful to console others and myself.' (4) Venting of emotions. Three female EAs recalled that ranting occasionally [to their husbands] much helped relieve their stress.

### ***Sub-theme 5: Emotion-focused coping strategies for families***

Two codes were constructed within this sub-theme: (1) acceptance, and (2) understanding of each other. The average score of EAs' rating for family support (1-5 points) is 4.08, which is much higher than that of company support. However, there are still some understanding gaps between the EAs and their families. For example, UK6 said, 'sometimes my wife cannot understand my role and commitment to the team.'

## **5. Discussion**

There is minimal research on employees' stress whilst working virtually, particularly in the pandemic lockdown environment (Thompson et al., 2021). Therefore, this study sought to fill in this gap by exploring how EAs have coped with stress from a transactional perspective in this stressful environment. Filling the research gap aims to provide the EA populations with some insightful coping strategies, which will be illustrated as follows. Addressing the research questions (i.e., the sources of, consequences of, and coping with stress) will make a contribution to the academia and the educational consulting field, given that WFH has been a new normal status for many EAs.

This study identified the stressors in relation to the EAs' stress experiences whilst working virtually during the lockdown, from which we can not only realize what caused their stress in essence (e.g., mixed boundaries, prolonged isolated working virtually), but also can understand their unique stressful situations (e.g., things mix up), which facilitated the author further exploring the sources of EAs' stress in their field from different levels (i.e., from colleagues, clients, families, and themselves). The consequences of EAs' stress mainly focused on: ineffective work and imbalanced work-life due to blurred boundaries, lower performance due to trust drop from clients and difficulty in team collaboration, low mood and depression due to prolonged isolated working virtually, and anxiety due to industrial uncertainty, etc. Therefore, it is imperative to discuss what may be the optimal coping strategies for EAs to mitigate stress whilst working virtually, enhance their work performance, and maintain a work-life balance. The key findings of the study are summarized as below:

### ***5.1 Stress shown in different forms in the virtual working environment***

The first finding was that the sources of stress raised in the literature review of this study were attested in the interview results; moreover, some stressors showed in different forms within our unique environment for the EA populations.

First, organizational change - one of the sources of stress proposed by McIntyre et al. (2017), is found to cause increased responsibilities and workloads due to other EAs' career change during the COVID-19. The drastic organizational change from offline to online mode resulted in difficulty in realizing colleagues' real opinions or reactions, the absence of colleagues' feedback loop, EAs' repetitive work and hardness in coordinating with team members, etc. These stresses whilst working virtually extended the findings of previous studies (Thompson et al., 2021). Interestingly though, the 'role conflict' revealed in our findings points more to using numerous online platforms to tackle job issues at the same time, and the 'role ambiguity' points more to insufficient company support, which caused the EAs to feel a lack of direction and occupational improvement during the lockdown. These stressors further triggered the EAs' intention of a career break or even career change. Furthermore, such organizational change empowered the EAs with bigger work autonomy. However, they did not reflect gratitude to their companies. This finding contrasts with previous research (Syrek et al., 2021). Such passive work autonomy may implicate insufficient company support.

Second, mixed boundaries between work-life - another source of stress proposed by McIntyre et al. (2017), prolonged EAs' working hours and incurred unique stressors whilst working virtually, such as interruptions, perplexity and upset in work,

imbalanced work-life, more conflicts and negative emotions from family members. These findings corroborate and extend previous research (Syrek et al., 2021; Shotwell et al., 2019). Interestingly, the family commitment - making meals and eating together, formed a breach of both temporal and mental boundaries for them and strengthened their stress whilst working virtually. This finding supports Ahrentzen's (1990) research. Similarly, our findings show that women EAs, particularly for whom have childcare obligations, endure larger stress as the conflicting roles vie for their attention whilst working virtually. It is consistent with previous research (Etheridge et al., 2020).

Third, deteriorated relationships - the third source of stress proposed by McIntyre et al. (2017), can occur over three dimensions. 1) Insufficient company support caused the EAs to perceive larger stress on their career path; 2) Clients' stealth mode, lower trust from new clients, and intermittent interruptions from existing clients caused the EAs to perceive more intense relationships with them; 3) More conflicts and negative emotions from family members. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Warren, 2017; Etheridge et al., 2020).

### **5.2 Consequences and EAs' reappraisal of stress**

The second key finding was that the sources of stress specified laid negative consequences on EAs' work and life, both in their work performance and emotional experience.

First, the interview findings revealed negative consequences on EAs' professional performance, such as being ineffective and less productive in work, hard to make decisions when it turns to team collaboration, hard to get occupational improvement, etc. The finding showed that albeit EAs were perceived as ineffective and less productive in work, they actively tried various actions to cope with the stressors. This conflicts with the notion of Hughes et al. (2019) and Fan et al. (2015) that continuous stress may be associated with minimal coping behaviors such as lower work commitment. This discrepancy may be due to the volatile pandemic acting as an uncontrollable variable continuously affecting the climate and pattern of the industry; thus, most EAs desired to overcome this stressful situation to survive.

Second, following Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) transactional theory, it was found that the identified stressors would also affect their emotional experience. For example, the prolonged isolation caused EAs' low mood and depression, the uncertain future caused EAs' anxiety, and the lazy home nature caused EAs' tiredness and burnout. These intertwined emotional experiences aroused EAs' secondary appraisal of the stress, exacerbated their professional performance, and further triggered their coping measures whilst working virtually with extant or potential resources like instrumental support or emotional support. Interestingly, our findings showed that emotional contagion acted in a two-way manner over two dimensions (i.e., EAs and families, EAs and clients) since the workplace had been transitioned to home-based. This finding corroborates and extends the previous research that clients' negative emotions would affect educators (Kurdi & Archambault, 2018).

### **5.3 Coping strategies reorganized to accommodate the stressors**

The third key finding was that a series of problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies were identified, and their intrinsic features can be ascribed to the coping strategies defined and classified by Stanislawski (2019). For a systematic understanding of our research finding, the EAs' coping strategies were distributed into relevant coping categories. See Table 5.

Table 5: Categorization of the coping strategies for EAs whilst working virtually

<b>Coping category</b>	<b>Coping strategies</b>
<b>Problem-focused coping</b>	
Active coping	Boundary management and relaxation in self-work Pose positive information to clients Create opportunities for teamwork and communicate with EAs regularly Offer more work autonomy to EAs
Planning	Set work priority with a checklist Offer flexible schedule options to clients
Suppression of competing activities	Avoid social media
Seeking social support for instrumental reasons	Offer occupational training to EAs
<b>Emotion-focused coping</b>	
Seeking social support for emotional reasons	Communicate with intimates regularly
Positive reinterpretation and growth	Positive reinterpretation on isolated virtual working
Acceptance	Acceptance and understanding of family members
Turning to religion	Pray and engage in online promotion for religions
<b>'Less useful'</b>	
Focus on and venting of emotions	Ranting occasionally

Herewith, the coping strategy - offer more work autonomy to the EAs, highlights empowering them to finish their tasks and

handle family issues based on their actual situations, valuing their feedback, and offering more support to them instead of being ignorant or indifferent to their stress whilst working virtually. This finding is consistent with Yemisi et al.'s (2020) research. Meanwhile, the coping strategy - acceptance refers to that EAs should not only accept and understand what can be changed and what cannot, then focus energy to cope with the stressful situations (Hughes et al., 2019), but also points out that they should understand their family members and accept each others' stresses and flaws during the prolonged isolation.

Besides, it is interesting to note that ranting occasionally was found helpful, particularly for female EAs. This finding contrasts with Stanislawski's (2019) notion that venting emotions are less useful. The possible reason is that the effect of venting may vary under different prerequisites. In our interviews, the female EAs, particularly those with maternity or childcare obligations, had lovely partners who could really understand their stresses and accept their emotions.

Simply put, our findings offer new insights in the root causes of the common phenomenon of EAs' ineffective work, their sources of stress, and a series of coping strategies in the virtual working environment.

## 6. Conclusion

Stress and coping in the virtual workplace is a growing research area that tries to learn more about how employees negotiate personal, family, and work-related stressful situations. As such, this study aims to probe into the sources, consequences, and coping strategies of stress for EAs whilst working virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping*. From the sources of stress (i.e., from colleagues, clients, families, and individuals) that EAs perceived, numerous negative consequences were found to affect EAs' work and life. Therefore, a series of relevant coping strategies, including problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies, were proposed accordingly. These findings have positive implications for personal, family, and organizational practices that help defend against the stressors for EAs. This study also contributes to understanding how EAs dynamically appraise and reappraise the stressors from a transactional process perspective within the virtual working environment.

In conclusion, the findings are of great significance for EAs to learn how to be more adaptive to uncertainties whilst working virtually. Through taking personal, collective and coordinated actions to cope with the volatile environment, EAs' stressful psychological state can be avoided or mitigated, and their ineffective work and imbalanced work-life situation can be optimized in future pandemic lockdowns. Moreover, the stress perceptions and coping strategies may not only be generalized in the analytical method but also be extended in the research findings to the EA populations working from home.

There are limitations to this study. A potential research bias is that participants were presumed to experience finance-related stress during the COVID-19, there might be research result variations if they had no financial concerns out of premium word-of-mouth. Second, the study mainly relied on self-reported retrospective data, which are susceptible to being inaccurate. For example, the consequence of EAs' stress - considering career break or career change, needs further exploration to realize whether it is fundamentally due to financial-related stress (Szalma & Hancock, 2018, p.219), prolonged isolation (Thompson et al., 2021), insufficient company support (Cevenini et al., 2012), or a combination.

Future research should consider recommending EAs to employ the identified coping strategies over a period of time and measuring the subsequent coping effectiveness with quantitative instruments (e.g., questionnaire). Additionally, a larger sample size could be considered to see if the research results are replicated or more diverse.

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