

## Coping with stress and stress management as life ability of intellectually disabled students<sup>1</sup>

Stress is ever present in a human life. It is of relative character, depending both on objective and subjective factors in a person's life (e.g. the degree of stress intensity and how it is evaluated in a given situation, possibility and evaluation of controlling the situation, probability of its repetition), the person's different abilities, needs and values. It causes increased nervous tension accompanied by definitely unpleasant psychical and physical condition identified with a difficult situation, increased physical or psychical effort, pain, suffering.

The lack of inborn repertoire for coping with stress is the reason why people constantly seek and learn proper solutions for stressing situation, which are to decrease stress and minimise dangers connected with it. According to A. Antonovsky [after: H. Sęk 1996] efficient coping with stress depends on generalised immune resources placed both in an individual and the environment, which provide life experience favourable for development and maintaining of strong sense of coherence, i.e. general life orientation. Basic constituents of the sense of coherence are the following: sense of understanding the phenomena taking place in the surrounding environment, sense of ability to cope with life and sense of the meaningfulness of life, as well as:

- degree of being prepared for tasks one has to perform;
- efficiency of intellectual operations (intelligence i.e. concrete inborn properties of the nervous system, as well as actual degree of efficiency of the whole system);
- properties of nervous system which are reflected in one's temperament;
- actual psychical and physical condition depending on health;
- experience gathered so far in a given field of activity [B.Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2000].

Coping with stress can be considered as:

1. process i.e. cognitive evaluation of a given situation and one's own abilities; it includes initial evaluation of the meaning of the situation for the individual in categories of danger, loss or challenge as well as secondary one – concerning the

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<sup>1</sup>The aim of the research was to recognise the life situation of young people suffering from mild intellectual disability. Due to a limited space this paper focuses solely on the description of styles and strategies used by students in question in difficult situations for coping with and management of stress.

- evaluation of the degree of danger, one's own abilities and methods of coping in the given situation [R. Lazarius 1986];
2. strategy, i.e. particular methods adequate for objective situations and one's own abilities. Strategies can be focused upon: solving the problem and upon emotions; strategies for coping with stress based on problem solving require mainly cognitive activity and creative engagement.
  3. style, i.e. relatively fixed personal disposition of an individual aimed at focusing the attention on stressing factor and/or one's own reaction or at diverting the attention from the stressing factor and one's own reactions through engagement in other forms of activity. Styles for coping with stress are associated with social and cultural context, which defines particular rules for conduct.

Intellectual disability is a situation unfavourable for an individual, making it difficult or even impossible to function efficiently in various fields of life. The way in which an individual acts in difficult situations (deprivation, overburdening, hindrance, danger or conflict) depends not only on individual personality features of the individual, danger encountered or subjective interpretation of a given situation and oneself, but also on a number of psychical and social resources of the individual, on which the stress occurrence depends or which are the reason for stress occurrence. Learning difficulties of the intellectually disabled are the reason why school is the main cause for excessive stress in students. Three groups of stressing factors are responsible for stress: loss or damage, danger and challenge [R. Lazarius, 1986]. These stressing factors, lack or low level of life skills and often negative social pressure are the reason for dysfunctional behaviours in such students, which are manifested as anxiety, nervousness, tension, fear, isolation, depression, plaintiveness, distress, sense of loss, clumsiness, uncertainty, embarrassment, pessimism, lack of concentration, changeable moods, fatigue [R. Cattell, R. R. Shrader, K. Barton, 1974 in: L. Kulmatycki, 2007].

Self-estimation plays an important role in coping with stress [E. Dyduch, 2009]. Properly developed and adequate self-estimation makes it possible to direct emotions in a proper way and coping with stress, it influences the motivation to take various activities.

A system of preferred values [E. Dyduch, 2009] and conditions [E. Dyduch, 2008] as well as health promoting behaviours [E. Dyduch, 2007] play an important role in coping with stress.

The recognition of styles and strategies for coping with stress used by young people with intellectual disability allows to undertake such rehabilitation procedures which help to regain the impaired nervous balance by means of satisfying particular needs.

According to the research<sup>2</sup> concerning styles and strategies for coping with stress one can draw a conclusion that intellectually disabled young people clearly lack flexibility in choosing a strategy, the choice of strategies is rather narrow as well. Difficulties in learning desired behaviours in new situations occurring in most students

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<sup>2</sup> 56 students aged 14-17 from special secondary school for those suffering from mild intellectual disability took part in the research. In order to define the strategy for coping with stress a questionnaire was used. The subjects were to define in the questionnaire the situations which triggered negative emotions, their behaviour in such situations and methods of solving such situations.

are the reason why the students are unable to change the reception of such situations, so they constantly use one or two strategies. Rigid model of their behaviour, subjective sense of inability to solve the problems and lack of perceiving the connections between the activity and the results of such activity leads to avoiding all activity and passive waiting for support. In difficult situations they carry out a number of activities which make it impossible for them to evaluate their life situation in a rational and objective way. After perceiving a problem situation the subjects of the research manifested a short-lasting motivation to solve the given problem. As a consequence of cognitive processes' (especially perception and thinking) stimulation they had suggestions for solving particular problems and the will to carry out the suggestions in practice. However, in particular situations they acted spontaneously, reacting to external stimuli in a primitive way (they used previously gained experience to a limited degree, they guessed and provided answers without thinking them over). Fear of making a mistake and of making oneself ridiculous appeared shortly. Fear of confrontation with one's own thoughts and emotions caused decreased attention level, lack of logical thinking and inability to foresee the results of one's own behaviour, while the lack of immediate effect of their actions effectively inhibited the tendency to produce new hypotheses for solving the problem, lowering the level of performing complex cognitive tasks, which resulted in cognitive exhaustion. Positive emotions such as: joy, enthusiasm, feeling that one is competent, has power, importance, self-confidence, gradually changed into negative emotions. Irritation, anger, tension, exasperation, nervousness appeared. In problem situation, when multifarious needs were awakened, lack of satisfaction of the expectations connected with solving the problem, caused aggression. Verbal aggression was characteristic for behaviour of aggressive subjects. Curses, threats, biting critical messages were directed by students to one another with high voice and with sharp, often vulgar language. Impertinent, abusive phrases were often directed to the teacher. There were few students who manifested their dissatisfaction and anger caused by lack of effects of their actions in the form of physical aggression. It was directed towards their colleagues (nudging, pushing) also towards things (e.g. destroying things one had previously made). Autoaggression seldom occurred in the population under research. Destructive behaviours towards oneself were manifested as self-injuring – relatively harmless injuries or scratches, biting nails, biting lips or tongue.

In some students lack of possibility of acquiring a particular aim (solving a problem) caused shame, embarrassment, sense of guilt, inferiority. Stereotypical behaviours appeared, persistent application of some ideas (fixation) schematic activity and so called helplessness syndrome.

In difficult situations many students with intellectual disability directed their activity towards avoidance, escaping from the problem, without an attempt to solve it and abstaining from activity. They applied most often the strategy of escape by distraction, including both activity aiming at detachment from stressing situation or task by means of taking up an activity of a different type. There were such activities as eating, sleeping, watching TV, playing computer games, playing football, playing with favourite toys, less often cleaning, ordering one's things, or reading books.

Inability to perform a task resulted in the fact that students often used primitive problem solving techniques, typical for earlier stages of human development e.g. screaming aiming at forcing others to help them or do something instead of them, crying in order to arise teacher's sympathy for them.

Another strategy for coping with stress was social diversion. The subjects of the research looked for contacts with other people – they wanted to meet and spend time with close people (parents, siblings, friends) and with significant people (teachers, tutors, trainers, school educators). They emphasized that spending time and talking with those people was the most important for them.

In the process of rehabilitation, for institutions and people who socialise individuals with intellectual disability it should be of the highest importance to prepare such people to overcome stressing situations by providing to them models of new, proper behaviours being in accordance with applicable standards and rules for social coexistence and by shaping positive attitudes towards oneself and the world. Such preparation means teaching intentional activity which gives numerous strategies and styles for coping with stress. It is prerequisite for efficient functioning of an individual, as it provides internal composure, general satisfaction with life and possibility of achieving successes. It is an important factor making it possible to shape autonomy of an individual understood as ability to direct one's behaviour in a responsible way, making choices and creating social relations based upon reciprocity. It is an internal criterion for evaluating one's behaviour as far as satisfaction and personal happiness are concerned.

Issues related to coping with stress and stress management require broader research not only to satisfy cognitive inquisitiveness but also, or maybe mostly, to create for the intellectually disabled conditions enabling them to carry out the humane potential they possess. [Cibor, 2005].

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