

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The coping insights evident through self-reflection on stressful military training events: Qualitative evidence from self-reflection journals

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Abstract

Research has demonstrated that adaptive forms of self-reflection on stressor events and insight may strengthen resilient capacities. However, the coping insights that emerge during self-reflection are notoriously under-researched. In this research, we sought to explore the evidence for the self-reflective activities and coping insights drawn from the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework and find evidence of new reflections or insights not captured within the framework. Qualitative analysis was used to examine weekly, written self-reflective journals completed by Officer Cadets involved in a randomised-controlled trial of Self-Reflection Resilience Training. Sixty-eight Officer Cadets who submitted their journals for analysis were included. Journals were analysed using a deductive thematic approach. Findings revealed that self-reflective activities occurred frequently over the course of the intervention. Coping insights were comparatively less frequent, but conveyed complex ideas about the self in the context of stressor exposure, broad principles about stress and coping, and nuanced interpretations regarding the interaction between the efficacy of coping approaches and broader contextual and intrapersonal factors. These findings demonstrate the critical role of coping insight during Self-Reflection Resilience Training, with implications for developing a validated self-report measure of self-reflective activity and coping insight.

KEYWORDS

diary, mental health, resilience, self-awareness, wisdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

Although stressor exposure has the demonstrated potential to impair mental health (e.g., Overstreet et al., 2017), scholars suggest that stressful experiences may also have the potential to strengthen

resilient capacities (Seery & Quinton, 2016). Resilient capacities are the biological, social, psychological, and environmental characteristics that increase the likelihood of a resilient outcome (Kalisch et al., 2015). Resilience as an outcome is the maintenance or quick recovery of mental health or functioning during and after exposure

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to psychological risk (Kalisch et al., 2017). A key question for research is: What mechanisms allow potentially stressful events to be transformed into opportunities for strengthening capacities for resilience?

Previous theoretical work has suggested a role for introspective processes involved in resilient re-integration, whereby adversity is transformed into opportunities to identify and nurture resilient capacities (Richardson, 2002). Studies have also demonstrated that some forms of reflective thinking are associated with increased resilience and personal growth (Kealy et al., 2021) and negatively predict distress following life stressors (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017). However, the precise nature of these self-reflective practices and the mediating processes involved in the refinement of capacities for resilience is not well-established.

To bridge this gap, the Systematic Self-Reflection (SSR) model of resilience strengthening (Crane, Searle, Kangas, & Nwiran, 2019) proposed that a specific adaptive approach to self-reflection on daily stressor events may culminate in new insights about the nature of stress and one's approach to coping (i.e., coping insights) that drive the refinement and development of capacities for resilience. Adaptive self-reflection is an active introspective practice aimed at understanding and evaluating one's emotions, cognitions, and actions motivated either by curiosity or interest in the self in context (Takano & Tanno, 2009). Coping insight is the outcome of understanding one's own thoughts, emotions, and behaviour (Grant et al., 2002) in the context of the coping process (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021). The conceptualisation of insight as a valuable construct involved in personal growth aligns with a foundation of quantitative research demonstrating a positive association between insight and resilience, cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, positive affect, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness (e.g., Cowden & Meyer-Weitz, 2016; Grant et al., 2002; Silvia & Phillips, 2011).

In accordance with the SSR model, qualitative methods have shed light on the capacity for self-reflection to culminate in new understandings that may enrich wellbeing and performance. For example, qualitative studies have identified that therapists (Gale & Schröder, 2014; McGillivray et al., 2015), health practitioners (Cunningham et al., 2018; Lutz et al., 2013), and teachers (Husu et al., 2008; Toom et al., 2015) who engage in structured opportunities for reflective practice report self-described improvements in technical skills, interpersonal and relational skills, empathy for clients and students, and awareness of their own thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attributes. Qualitative work has also pointed to the existence of a self-reflective style that helps individuals to consider what is and what is not effective during the coping process (Hauser et al., 2006). Recent cross-sectional research has demonstrated that adaptive forms of self-reflection are associated with an increase in perceived resilience and wellbeing via self-insight, but only when ruminative thought was low, rather than high (Bucknell et al., 2022). However, in this study insight was measured as *generalised* self-insight (Grant et al., 2002), rather than specific to the coping process. The SSR model proposes that insights specific to the coping

process are likely to be stronger predictors of the refinement and development of resilient capacities. However, to date no research has investigated evidence of specific self-insights related to the coping process that may emerge from adaptive forms of self-reflection, specifically those self-reflective practices proposed by the SSR model.

Self-Reflection Resilience Training (SRT) was developed on the basis of the propositions of the SSR model and the aforementioned qualitative and quantitative scholarship. SRT focuses on encouraging adaptive self-reflection on stressor events via a series of guided self-reflection journaling exercises. These journaling exercises include structured questions about the stressors that participants have recently faced, their initial reactions to those triggering events, the coping strategies and resources they applied to address the situation at hand, the effectiveness of such coping strategies and resources, and constructive adaptations that could be made to these strategies and resources to bolster their effectiveness. Four key principles underpin SRT. First, daily stressor exposure can function as an opportunity to strengthen resilience. Second, each individual has a unique repertoire of resilient capacities. Third, capacities for resilience will be most useful if they are tailored to the individual's strengths and stressor context. Finally, to develop capacities for resilience, we need to support the use of adaptive self-reflection and coping insight in the course of everyday life.

SRT follows a history of interventions that seek to enhance resilience. The majority to date have focussed on teaching cognitive and behavioural coping skills (Robertson et al., 2015). However, recent meta-analyses (Joyce et al., 2018; Vanhove et al., 2016) and a systemic review (Robertson et al., 2015) have concluded that these traditional interventions demonstrate small to moderate, diminishing, and inconsistent effects on mental health outcomes, alluding to a need for interventions that produce more robust and longer-lasting effects on mental health outcomes. In contrast, SRT does not directly teach cognitive and behavioural coping skills; rather, it encourages self-reflective activities that are thought to engender the emergence of coping self-insights that propel personalised refinements to resilient capacities.

Randomised controlled trials have demonstrated that the SRT approach may be more effective than traditional cognitive and behavioural coping skills interventions at strengthening resilience (Crane, Boga, et al., 2019; Falon, Karin, et al., 2021), speaking to the broad promise of self-reflective approaches. However, whether or not coping specific insights emerge from the self-reflective practices encouraged during SRT has not been investigated. Only one past qualitative study has explored the reflective activities of military police during stressful investigator training. This study identified that engagement with SRT prompted frequent reflections on involuntary reactions to stressors, personal coping efforts, and opportunities for growth in the stressor context (Crane, Rapport, et al., 2019). However, the study was limited by a lack of investigation of coping insights and an analysis of participant reactions to the training, rather than their actual reflective journals.

1.1 | What reflective activities and coping insights strengthen the capacity for resilience?

The SSR model was extended by introducing the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework to articulate the nature of the self-reflective activities and coping insights that are involved in the development and refinement of resilient capacities (see Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021, for the detailed framework and Table 1 for a briefer summary). The Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework describes eight exemplar reflective activities ideally surfacing from the five reflective practices described by Crane, Searle, et al. (2019) in the SSR model: Self-awareness, trigger identification, reappraisal of growth from stressors,¹ evaluation, and future-focus. During SRT, these reflective activities are encouraged via questions within the journal exercises (see: Crane, Boga, et al., 2019 for a detailed description).

The Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework also proposes 13 exemplar coping insights that are derived from these reflective activities to support the development and refinement of capacities for resilience (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021). These coping insights are characterised by a higher degree of self-understanding and as capable of conveying comparatively more complex, deeper interpretations about one's response to stressors across time and contexts, broad principles about the nature of stress and coping, and the interaction between one's choice of coping approach and broader contextual and intrapersonal factors. Unlike the reflective activities, coping insights are not explicitly taught; rather, coping insights may emerge in a more spontaneous or ad libitum manner as participants engage with self-reflective activities, observe the self-in-context, and undertake a deeper analysis of their stressor experiences and coping approaches. However, questions remain about the nature of coping insights that emerge as a result of adaptive self-reflection. Although the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework proposes a set of coping self-insights that may emerge from these reflective practices, there is no empirical validation of such insights or whether coping insights exist that have failed to be considered by the framework.

1.2 | Next steps for research into self-reflection, coping insight, and resilient capacities

To date, the nature of adaptive forms of self-reflection and coping insight has received scant attention. The Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework is the first to propose a set of discrete reflections and coping insights that may potentiate the refinement of resilient capacities in the context of the coping process (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021). In this way, such self-reflective activities and coping insights may not emerge in practice and qualitative research provides an opportunity to investigate whether participants reflect in this way, and have the particular insights specified by the framework. Qualitative methods also allow an investigation of what should be considered in the framework, but is presently absent. Given that one aim of this study was to determine whether there was evidence of

reflections or insights that were currently neglected by the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework, qualitative methods allow a tool for understanding the variance in participant responses to the SRT questions in their own words. Further to this, qualitative methods can facilitate more nuanced interpretations of research trial findings by illuminating potential mechanisms responsible for intervention effectiveness (Carey & Stiles, 2016). Finally, in the absence of a quantitative measure of these constructs of interest, qualitative methods may serve as a precursor to quantitative research by exploring the nature of complex and difficult-to-quantify constructs, such as cognitive processes, ahead of future scale development (Mazzola et al., 2011). The qualitative exploration of reflective activities and coping insights is an intermediate step between the establishment of the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework and the validation of a quantitative scale that will enable future investigations of the mediating roles of reflective activities and coping insights.

1.3 | The present study

The aims of the current study were two-fold. First, we sought to determine whether there was evidence of the reflective activities and coping insights drawn from the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021) in the self-reflection journals completed by Officer Cadets during participation in SRT and the nature of these reflective activities and coping insights. Second, our aim was to determine whether any self-reflective activities or coping insights are frequently observed in the self-reflection journals completed by Officer Cadets that are not represented in the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework. This could identify whether there is a need to extend the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework to include other reflective activities or coping insights that, in practice, emerge during self-reflection in the context of the coping process that may be important to the refinement of resilient capacities.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Study design and underpinning philosophical assumptions

We used qualitative methods to initially explore the adequacy of the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework. Data for this study were collected as part of a clustered-randomised controlled trial of SRT (see Falon, Karin, et al., 2021 for a full description of this trial). As part of the trial, the intervention group completed five guided reflective journaling activities and these were used as the basis for our analysis. Qualitative analysis of journals can offer a rich and ecologically valid source of information regarding participants' personal reactions and interpretations of events and situations (Day & Thatcher, 2009), as evidenced through previous

TABLE 1 The frequency and examples of the reflective activities and coping insights explored in this study

Overarching reflective practice	Reflective activity/coping insight	Domain of reflective activity/coping insight	Example quote	Frequency of participants demonstrating theme
Self-awareness	Reflective activity	Identification of cognitive, affective, physical, and behavioural reactions to stressors	'I was thinking about how weak others would view me as, how much of a failure I am, etc'. (P6)	65
Self-awareness	Reflective activity	Identification of personally endorsed values	'[The] following characteristics were demonstrated: Integrity, self-discipline, patience, self-awareness, strength' (P24)	55
Self-awareness	Reflective activity	Identification of coping strategies, resources, and/or beliefs previously applied to address stressors	'[I] spoke at length about the situation with my partner and family' (P106)	61
Self-awareness	Coping insight	Understanding the time course of One's reactions	'I learnt that any undue reactions on my part to stress were usually temporary' (P43)	18
Self-awareness	Coping insight	Understanding the inter-relationships between One's various types of stressor reactions	'I felt nervous and frustrated/angry about the perceived realism of the standards expected, and when I worried about failing I began to sweat' (P12)	38
Self-awareness	Coping insight	Understanding the influence of One's personal reactions on the behaviour of others and vice versa	'[They had] very low morale. It made others around them more depressed' (P46)	23
Self-awareness	Coping insight	Understanding whether One's response to a stressor moves them towards or away from their personal values	'Self-discipline and integrity were exercised during this event. I was not directed to complete the cleaning tasks, I just knew that good performance and avoiding punishment would occur if I completed them' (P69)	17
Self-awareness	Coping insight	Acknowledging the diverse range of coping strategies, resources, and/or beliefs applied during the coping process	'[I learned that] everyone has different coping strategies/mechanisms that allow them to overcome stress. There are a vast array of strategies that suit people differently' (P27)	10
Trigger identification	Reflective activity	Identification of particular triggering events that have cued a stress response	'I was struggling to learn a concept. Had to spend a couple of hours revising it [sic] to understand it before starting on work which took another 2 hours meaning I had a late night' (P32)	61
Trigger identification	Coping insight	Understanding the overarching patterns of triggers across time and contexts	'There have been no singular events that I would deem stressful over the last week, but the amalgamation of everything has created stress' (P54)	26
Trigger identification	Coping insight	Interpretations of why these situations induce stress	'It was the uncertainty in each situation that made them stressful' (P93)	59
Reappraisal of growth from stressors	Reflective activity	Considering the opportunity for personal development in the stressor context	'[I learned] that I will get through it. Even if I fail, I will learn where I went wrong and I will improve next time' (P93)	7
Reappraisal of growth from stressors	Coping insight	Understanding that stressors, while uncomfortable, also provide an opportunity for growth across the lifespan	'I recognise that stress is required for development and is great for growth and increased performance in many situations. However, operating under great stress is not sustainable for long periods of time' (P69)	7

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Overarching reflective practice	Reflective activity/coping insight	Domain of reflective activity/coping insight	Example quote	Frequency of participants demonstrating theme
Evaluation	Reflective activity	Observations about the usefulness of previously adopted coping strategies or resources	'After I was resigned to conducting it I very much got involved and took it full on. My performance increased as I was doing well physically which put me in a headspace to continue' (P47)	61
Evaluation	Coping insight	Understanding the nuanced interactions between stressor characteristics and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources	'Relaxation tasks help sleep eventually [and] sense of humour helps vent... [however it] doesn't change my situation' (P21)	31
Evaluation	Coping insight	Coping insight: Understanding the potential for coping strategies to be associated with distinct or even oppositional shorter-term and longer-term outcomes	'[I] mostly confide in friends at the college that share my frustrations. While this isn't an immediate fix it does offer me perspective, and shows me others share my perspective' (P73)	33
Evaluation	Coping insight	Understanding the nuanced interactions between individual strengths and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources	'[My] ability to use sense of humour [helped me] to look at it from the funny side of things' (P98)	15
Evaluation	Coping insight (new)	Understanding of desired responses or outcomes that align with their personal values	'In hindsight I am quite disappointed in the way I reacted to the situation as it doesn't align with the type of person I'm trying to be... ideally I would have liked to reacted [by] acknowledging that the situation is annoying but then switching gears and start looking at the positives' (P104)	55
Future-focus	Reflective activity	Identification of how One's capacities for resilience may be maintained, changed, or optimised in the future	'IOT mitigate this & achieve success throughout the day, a more organised evening would help' (P1)	62
Future-focus	Reflective activity	Identification of existing or required coping resources that may support One's capacities for resilience in the future	'[I] require some external support, or a confidant to talk about my day-to-day problems' (P73)	61
Future-focus	Coping insight	Understanding the anticipated effect of resilient capacities applied in the future	'Need to be more physically fit to improve ability to make decisions in exertive environments' (P23)	31
Future-focus	Coping insight	Understanding the congruence between the type and source of coping resources available, and the anticipated needs of the individual in their future stressor context	'The Padres in particular are people whom I appreciate because of my religious background' (P77)	30

studies that have used journals as a data collection tool in the context of exploring the coping process (e.g., Gonzalez & Lengacher, 2007).

Aspects of both a positivist philosophical approach and an interpretivist philosophical approach informed the current study design, in line with growing acknowledgement in the literature that multiple philosophical approaches may simultaneously influence qualitative investigations (Lin, 1998). On the one hand, our research was guided by a positivist approach via the use of a theoretical framework as the basis for identifying observable and generalisable

patterns in the frequency of self-reflective activities and coping insight (Braun & Clarke, 2021). On the other hand, our research was also partially informed by an interpretivist approach in that we acknowledged that individuals experience the world in highly subjective and unique ways that may not 'fit' our a priori themes. In our study, this partial subscription to an interpretivist approach influenced our decision to use rich qualitative quotes—rather than quantitative frequencies in isolation—as the basis for deepening our understanding of how individuals uniquely experience self-reflective practices and coping insight.

2.2 | Participants

Two-hundred and eighteen second-class Officer Cadets were recruited from the Royal Military College, Australia to participate in a clustered-randomised controlled trial of SRT (see Falon, Karin, et al., 2021 for a full description of this trial). Of the total sample, 109 participants were ineligible for participation in the present study as they were randomly allocated to the control condition of the trial and therefore did not participate in SRT; a further 4 participants were also ineligible as they erroneously swapped between the control condition and SRT during the trial. The final sample of participants who were eligible for inclusion in the present study therefore comprised 105 Officer Cadets. Of the eligible sample, 35 (33.33%) participants were excluded from the final analysis as they did not submit a self-reflection workbook for analysis, and a further 2 participants were excluded as they submitted blank workbooks. The final sample for analysis therefore consisted of 68 Officer Cadets (82% males, 9% females, 9% not specified, mean age = 22.94 years, SD = 3.85, age range = 18–38 years). Participants had served in the Army for an average of 2.47 years (SD = 2.38, range = 0–17 years). The military training setting, which is the context for this work, has been described in detail previously (Crane, Boga, et al., 2019; Falon, Karin, et al., 2021).

2.3 | Procedure

The study was approved by the Department of Defence and Veteran's Affairs Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: O15-17), reviewed by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 5201800005), and pre-registered with the Australian New Zealand Clinical Trials Registry (Trial ID: ACTRN12617001377325). Data collection took place during routine training at the Royal Military College, Australia that prepares Cadets for service as Army Officers. Officer training at the Royal Military College consists of three phases, each 6 months long, with 2 weeks break between phases for rest and leisure time. The second-class phase of training, during which the data collection for the present study took place, is considered to be a formative period for Cadets due to their involvement in many demanding training activities, including academic work, physical training, field exercises, and ongoing assessments of fitness, academic ability, leadership skills, operational skills, and character. On 29 January 2018, at the commencement of second class, Cadets included in the present study undertook a 40-min lecture-style session in a large lecture theatre that introduced participants to the application of self-reflection in the context of resilience development and enhancement. The training was delivered by a military psychologist experienced in training large groups of soldiers. During this initial brief, participants completed a values exercise that required them to identify their values and value-based goals pertaining to leadership under pressure by rating a list of 32 values (e.g., perseverance) from 'very important' to 'not at all important' on a six-point Likert scale. Participants also had the option to specify their own values, which they could refer back to in the

subsequent weekly self-reflection journaling sessions. The content of the SRT intervention has been described in detail previously (Falon, Karin, et al., 2021).

This initial session was followed by five 15-min weekly guided self-reflection exercises conducted between 31st January 2018 and 2nd March 2018. These exercises were timed to coincide with the increasing frequency and intensity of training demands over the second-class training period. During the journaling sessions, the training instructor was present to answer any questions about the self-reflection exercises, but otherwise provided Cadets time to write. On average, participants completed 3.29 workbook entries out of a maximum of five entries over the course of the study (SD = 1.27). Participants were invited to submit their workbooks for analysis at the end of the fifth journaling session, but were not required to do so; a desire for greater privacy or continued access to the workbooks could potentially account for why 35 participants did not submit a self-reflection workbook for analysis. These workbooks were de-identified after collection through the allocation of a unique identification number to each participant.

2.4 | The self-reflection journals

The five entries of the self-reflection journals were structured in nature and came in three formats: Self-focussed reflection (Weeks 1, 2 and 3), other-focussed reflection (Week 4), and meta-reflection (Week 5). Entries in Weeks 1, 2, and 3 encouraged reflection on one's private experience of demands, their reaction to those demands, their coping process and how effective it was, and how they might refine their coping strategies or resources in the future. Week 4 encouraged reflection on their observations of how others cope with demands in the same military training context. Although these questions involved similar reflective practices identified in the SSR model (with the exception of 'reappraisal of growth from stressors' that could not be observed), these questions encouraged reflection on the behaviour of others (e.g., 'Describe a recent event where you observed others operating in a stressful environment'; 'What did you observe them doing in this situation in order to achieve their goals?'). The rationale for the 'other-focus' of this reflective activity was to explore the potential for vicarious learning in the context of coping, in line with scholarship emphasising the value of learning from how others cope during adversity and self-distancing strategies for self-insight emergence (e.g., Falon, Karin, et al., 2021; Grossmann & Kross, 2010).

The final reflective activity in Week 5 was a meta-reflection intended to encourage a review of their reflections over the previous four weeks. The intention of this meta-reflection was not to elicit all the individual self-reflective practices, but rather to support the holistic analysis of their development throughout the training process and determine clear goals for the future development of capacities for resilience (e.g., 'What did you learn about yourself from these experiences?'; 'Are there any strategies or approaches—that you have not yet tried—that may result in more beneficial outcomes?'). Sample questions included in each week of the reflective activities are

provided as supplementary material in Falon, Karin, et al. (2021).² The intention of the analysis was to determine whether SRT as a package, including the values activity and the five self-reflection exercises, was able to elicit the reflective activities and coping insights specified in the framework, rather than any one exercise.

2.5 | Analysis strategy

In line with a positivist philosophical approach, we used a deductive thematic analytic approach to obtain rich information about the frequency and nature of reflective activities and coping insights that emerge during participation in SRT. Deductive thematic approaches offer a theory-driven basis for coding qualitative data, whereby a pre-existing theory, concept, or set of themes identified in previous research is used as an a priori lens through which to organise, code, and interpret qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, we used the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021) to guide our deductive thematic analysis of the workbook exercises completed by participants, whereby the 8 reflective activities and 13 coping insights defined by Falon, Kangas, and Crane (2021) were used as a priori themes or codes to classify and interpret the available qualitative data. We selected this approach due to its capacity to identify tangible evidence of coping insights that the past literature suggests may support resilience development and enhancement, in line with our positivist philosophical approach. During the coding process, an inductive approach was also applied to enable new self-reflection or coping insight themes to emerge from the most frequent and dominant themes in the raw data.

After the coding process, two counts were calculated for each code: (1) The number of distinct participants who demonstrated evidence of engagement with a given reflective activity or coping insight at least once during the entire intervention (termed 'participants'), and (2) The number of distinct workbook entries or responses to the values exercise that contained evidence of a reflective activity or coping insight (termed 'instances'). In this way, a distinct participant could demonstrate a reflective activity or coping insight in up to six instances. Exemplar quotes were identified for each code to facilitate a richer exploration of the idiosyncrasies regarding how individuals uniquely experience reflective activities and coping insight, in alignment with a comparatively more interpretivist philosophical approach.

2.6 | Methodological rigour

All written responses were read by the first author to facilitate familiarisation with the data. Consistent a deductive thematic approach, the first author then commenced a close reading of all responses and commenced coding segments of text from the completed journals using the components of the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework as a codebook developed a priori. To provide methodological rigour, the codebook included clear definitions of each of the framework themes and each coder was required

to refresh their knowledge of the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework prior to coding. Moreover, the second author acted as 'critical friend' for the initial coder (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 182) by independently and critically evaluating all coding completed by the first author (e.g., by challenging their assumptions or interpretations, offering alternative viewpoints, and reviewing the raw data). These two coders met online weekly during the data analysis process to critically discuss interpretations of the participants' self-reflection journals. The fourth author and senior team member reviewed a sample of codes (~15%) and resolved coding discrepancies in cases where the first and second authors could not reach a consensus about a coding decision. The fourth author was consulted bi-weekly to review coding. The involvement of multiple coders was intended to reduce bias associated with the coding process, as per other studies that have similarly used a deductive thematic approach (e.g., Anderson et al., 2016) and the 'critical friend' methodology in particular (e.g., Chapman et al., 2021).

In terms of new theme identification, all coders collaboratively discussed whether there was sufficient evidence of a new theme, whether the theme was distinct from existing themes, and how the new theme could be defined with reference to existing scholarship. Although this represented a deviation from a deductive thematic analysis (towards an inductive thematic analysis), Braun and Clarke (2012) acknowledge that qualitative studies often use a combination of inductive and deductive approaches in practice as it is rare for coders to completely ignore the semantic content of the data.

All coders had a background in psychology and were familiar with relevant theoretical work in resilience training, coping, psychological resilience, and the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework. This senior team member had substantive expertise in resilience, the SSR model, the SRT intervention, and over 10 years of experience in military psychology.

3 | RESULTS

A summary of the reflective activities and coping insights explored is provided in Table 1, including the number of participants who demonstrated each construct and a sample quote from the participant journals corresponding to each reflective activity and coping insight.

3.1 | Reflective activities and coping insights related to self-awareness

3.1.1 | Reflective activity: Identification of cognitive, affective, physical, and behavioural reactions to stressors

Sixty-five participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 176$) identified one or more initial reactions to stressors in themselves or others. These included a combination of cognitive reactions (e.g., 'I was thinking about how weak others would view me as, how much of a failure I am, etc' (P6)),

affective reactions (e.g., 'This made me nervous, anxious and worried' (P104)), physical reactions (e.g., 'Physically I was tired and wanted to sleep' (P98)), and behavioural reactions (e.g., 'My performance during my CONOPS was affected' (P84)). A minority of participants reported a positive initial reaction to stressors, such as a sense of physical and cognitive preparedness or readiness (e.g., 'I felt physically fit and able. I felt like I wanted to prove myself' (P99)).

3.1.2 | Reflective activity: Identification of personally endorsed values

Fifty-five participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 123$) identified one or more personally endorsed values, predominantly during the values exercise and occasionally during the journaling sessions. Examples of frequently cited values included self-discipline, competence, strength, perseverance, integrity, courage, patience, loyalty, empathy, teamwork, humour, and optimism.

3.1.3 | Reflective activity: Identification of coping strategies, resources, and/or beliefs previously applied to address stressors

Sixty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 180$) identified one or more coping strategies, resources and/or beliefs that they had previously applied to address a stressor. Emotion-focussed coping strategies or resources were most frequently cited by participants, such as seeking social connection or support (e.g., '[I] spoke at length about the situation with my partner and family' (P106)) and avoidance coping (e.g., 'I know that I like to drive when I am stressed so driving to Maccas to get a snack helped me to take a break and reduce stress' (P263)). This was also accompanied by appraisal-focussed coping strategies such as accepting the situation (e.g., 'I thought to myself I have done all I can, it's not in my hands' (P37)). Problem-focussed coping strategies included applying organisation, preparation, or time management strategies (e.g., 'Broke the situation down and prioritised work using deadlines or priorities and worked through each task methodically' (P80)) and persevering or 'pushing through' the situation (e.g., 'I just got on with the task. No point in being stressed, and then stopping everything to de-stress and then continue. There's no time' (P86)). Less frequently, participants demonstrated evidence of resilient beliefs that aided them during stressful periods, such as coping self-efficacy (e.g., 'I can handle more than I previously thought and am capable of working well under stress' (P80); 'I am capable of overcoming struggles' (P102); 'I am more emotionally resilient than I had expected' (P224)).

3.1.4 | Coping insight: Understanding the time course of one's reactions

Eighteen participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 24$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to the time course of one's reactions to stressors. Most

often, this centred on the observation that one's initial reaction to a stressor was temporary or reduced in intensity over time (e.g., 'I learnt that any undue reactions on my part to stress were usually temporary' (P43)). A smaller proportion of coping insights described reactions that persisted for a longer period, such as for several days after the stressor event had taken place (e.g., 'I haven't developed [any new coping strategies] yet because I'm still experiencing the frustration from my performance yesterday' (P257)) or those that reoccurred on anniversary of a major stressor (e.g., death of a loved one).

3.1.5 | Coping insight: Understanding the inter-relationships between one's various types of stressor reactions

Thirty-eight participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 50$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to the inter-relationships between one's various types of stressor reactions. These most commonly were about how one's thoughts or emotions influenced subsequent cognitions (e.g., 'As the negative emotions and thinking build up, it causes me to question myself and fill me with doubt' (P6)), physiological reactions (e.g., 'I felt nervous and frustrated/angry about the perceived realism of the standards expected, and when I worried about failing I began to sweat' (P12)), and performance (e.g., '[My] emotions, thoughts and physical feelings made me perform to a poorer standard in other areas of sports/fitness/academics' (P98)). Others explored how their thoughts, emotions, or behaviour were influenced by physiological reactions to stressors such as physical exhaustion, thirst, or hunger (e.g., 'My ability to deal with stressors varied with fatigue significantly. When tired, I was more likely to be less optimistic, and this reduced my capacity to efficiently complete tasks' (P73)).

3.1.6 | Coping insight: Understanding the influence of one's personal reactions on the behaviour of others and vice versa

Twenty-three participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 26$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to the influence of personal reactions on the behaviour of others and vice versa. Most often, these coping insights arose from a journal prompt in the other-focussed reflection exercise in Week 4 encouraging the observation of how *others* reacted to stressors. These coping insights often conveyed perspectives about the contagion of negative emotions or counter-productive behaviour to others in their current work setting (e.g., '[They had] very low morale. It made others around them more depressed' (P46)). In other cases, participants observed the capacity for positive role modelling and supportive leadership behaviour to lift the overall morale of their group and benefit others in a positive manner (e.g., 'People want to work for people who are positive, motivating and inspiring. A very horrible long task taking up our precious time was made better by our inspiring & motivating leader'

(P218)). In addition, some participants noted that the normalisation of stress in the shared group environment modified their own reaction (e.g., 'Everyone relies on knowing everyone else is under stress so it doesn't seem as bad' (P26)).

3.1.7 | Coping insight: Understanding whether one's response to a stressor moves them towards or away from their personal values

Seventeen participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 20$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to whether a response to a stressor moved the individual towards or away from their personal values and value-based goals. Although some of these coping insights emerged whilst reflecting on one's own personal experience of stressors (e.g., 'Self-discipline and integrity were exercised during this event. I was not directed to complete the cleaning tasks, I just knew that good performance and avoiding punishment would occur if I completed them' (P69)), they also emerged in the context of reflecting on how *others* coped with similar demands during the other-focussed reflection exercise in Week 4 (e.g., '[They] displayed a lack of discipline which caused them to procrastinate. Began to waste the time of others and annoy them' (P44)). In some cases, participants simply acknowledged that they demonstrated values in the absence of any reference to specific behaviour, particularly during the free-response component of the values activity (e.g., '[The] following characteristics were demonstrated: Integrity, self-discipline, patience, self-awareness, strength' (P24)).

3.1.8 | Coping insight: Acknowledging the diverse range of coping strategies, resources, and/or beliefs applied during the coping process

Ten participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 10$) demonstrated coping insights regarding the diverse range of coping strategies, resources, or beliefs applied during the coping process. Insights in this domain often centred around the need to adapt, evolve, or switch coping strategies as required by the context (e.g., 'I applied time management IOT catch up. As I started to catch up I started using social & team support' (P16)), or the need for a range or combination of different coping strategies in response to different types of stressors ('[I learned that] I have coping strategies for coping with immediate stress, things that come up quickly & are over quickly, however I'm less successful at coping with long-term, slow burn stress' (P84)). Less frequently, participants acknowledged that a range of coping strategies are available that vary in suitability from person to person (e.g., '[I learned that] everyone has different coping strategies/mechanisms that allow them to overcome stress. There are a vast array of strategies that suit people differently' (P27)). Notably, the evidence in support of this coping insight focussed almost exclusively on the range of coping strategies available, yet only sparingly on coping resources or beliefs.

3.2 | Reflective activities and coping insights from trigger identification

3.2.1 | Reflective activity: Identification of particular triggering events that have cued a stress response

Sixty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 163$) identified one or more triggering events that cued a stress response. Frequently cited examples of stressors included having a high volume of work to complete (e.g., 'I was struggling to learn a concept. Had to spend a couple of hours revising it [sic] to understand it before starting on work which took another two hours meaning I had a late night' (P32)), performance pressure (e.g., 'We had a BC day inspection on Monday morning. As part of the inspection, we had to get our uniform inspected as well. I was aware that I had a stain on my shirt and as such, was very concerned about the inspection... the inspectors were very thorough in their duties' (P10)), interpersonal conflict (e.g., 'I was very busy last Thursday & Friday and I forgot the date I didn't realise it was my girlfriend's birthday. She was really upset with me and didn't talk to me all Saturday' (P85)), and physical demands (e.g., 'During the week I found the pack march particularly challenging both physically & mentally' (P221)).

3.2.2 | Coping insight: Understanding the overarching patterns of triggers across time and contexts

Twenty-six participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 31$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to overarching patterns of triggers across time and contexts. In some cases, this entailed the observation that stressors built up over multiple occurrences (e.g., 'Months [of] time and workload pressures, frequent assessment and other things all due at the same time' (P80)), or that stressors exerted cumulative or compounding effects in conjunction with other concurrent stressors (e.g., 'There have been no singular events that I would deem stressful over the last week, but the amalgamation of everything has created stress' (P54)). In other cases, participants noticed that the first exposure to a stressor was more stressful than subsequent exposures (e.g., 'As this was my first punishment here, if I received another, I would assume it wouldn't feel as harsh' (P75)), culminating in a gradual process of desensitisation over time (e.g., 'Being exposed previously to an environment is like de-sensitising yourself to a stressor. It will take an unexpected event or situation to create stress' (P11)).

3.2.3 | Coping insight: Interpretations of why these situations induce stress

Fifty-nine participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 116$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to interpretations of why triggering events induced stress. A commonly cited example included that the triggering event was stressful due to it being outside of the individual's personal

control (e.g., 'They were external pressures, or out of my control. Most were not stresses that were internally created or managed' (P84)) or, conversely, that the stressor was self-imposed (e.g., 'More so the stress/pressure I put on each situation, myself' (P104)). Many participants also made reference to the importance of the task at hand, either because the activity felt meaningless or unimportant (e.g., 'Being called back into work after hours after long days for meeting that were unnecessary & had no relevance to me' (P21)), or conversely because the activity was consequential in some way (e.g., '[I was concerned that] my mistakes or possible errors would poorly reflect me and reduce my chances of graduating' (P95)). Other interpretations included that the event was associated with a fear of failure (e.g., 'The most stressful part is the fear of failing' (P37)), entailed uncertainty (e.g., 'It was the uncertainty in each situation that made them stressful' (P93)), or uncovered a low level of perceived person-job fit (e.g., '[I learned that] maybe I should not be here (P57)').

3.3 | Reflective activities and coping insights emerging from reappraisal of growth from stressors

3.3.1 | Reflective activity: Considering the opportunity for personal development in the stressor context

Seven participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 8$) considered the opportunity for personal development in the stressor context (3.1). Most often, this entailed the observation that the experience of undertaking training at the Royal Military College is a constant learning process (e.g., '[I learned] that I will get through it. Even if I fail, I will learn where I went wrong and I will improve next time' (P93)) and has the potential to shape the individual into a stronger leader in the longer-term (e.g., 'I need to prove this to myself, this is my duty. This will improve my ability to command at a PI [Platoon] level and above' (P221)). Relatedly, some participants demonstrated evidence of a challenge appraisal with respect to their current stressor (e.g., 'I felt like this was a challenge that the team had to get through' (P99)).

3.3.2 | Coping insight: Understanding that stressors, while uncomfortable, also provide an opportunity for growth across the lifespan

Seven participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 8$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to the understanding that stressors, while uncomfortable, also provide an opportunity for growth across the lifetime. Most often, this entailed insight into the fact that experiencing a healthy level of stress has a positive effect on performance (e.g., '[I learned that] stress makes me perform quite well' (P47)) and that stress is a meaningful and integral component of the learning process (e.g., 'Stress due to tiredness & exhaustion is part of II class' (P1)).

However, some participants perceived a complex relationship between stress and growth, whereby short-term stress of low to moderate intensity could serve an adaptive function, yet excessive or prolonged stress may not (e.g., 'I recognise that stress is required for development and is great for growth and increased performance in many situations. However, operating under great stress is not sustainable for long periods of time' (P69)).

3.4 | Reflective activities and coping insights from evaluation

3.4.1 | Reflective activity: Observations about the usefulness of previously adopted coping strategies or resources

Sixty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 153$) made observations about the usefulness of previously adopted coping strategies or resources. Most often, this involved commentary about a desirable outcome that occurred after the coping strategy or resource was applied, such as the attainment of a goal (e.g., 'Although I was stressed, I worked well to ultimately complete the coursework' (P10)), a change in emotional state or thought patterns (e.g., 'Writing down the problem allows me to not ponder & overthink the situation' (P46)), a change in performance, behaviour or skill level (e.g., 'After I was resigned to conducting it I very much got involved and took it full on. My performance increased as I was doing well physically which put me in a headspace to continue' (P47)), a change in physical state (e.g., 'Naps & food provided good energy' (P223)), and escape from the stressor (e.g., '[My strategy] took me away from [the] situation' (P43)). A smaller number of participants simply noted that their strategy or resource was effective, but with no specific reference to a tangible outcome.

3.4.2 | Coping insight: Understanding the nuanced interactions between stressor characteristics and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources

Thirty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 43$) demonstrated coping insights pertaining to the nuanced interactions between the context of the demand and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources. Most often, this entailed a consideration of contextual or situational factors hampering the application of a strategy or resource, such as lacking time (e.g., 'No time at RMC to effectively maintain contact with family' (P7)), lacking energy (e.g., '[My coping strategy] didn't always work, especially if I was tired' (P14)), or lacking the necessary confidence (e.g., 'I finished the task however don't feel confident I could do it on my own next time' (P101)). Others noted that applying a problem-focussed strategy would be ineffective in the context of a highly controlled operational environment (e.g., 'I cannot influence the College to provide more time/sleep' (P78)), or that applying an emotion-focussed coping strategy would do little to address the

actual problem at hand (e.g., 'Relaxation tasks help sleep eventually [and] sense of humour helps vent... [however it] doesn't change my situation' (P21)).

3.4.3 | Coping insight: Understanding the potential for coping strategies to be associated with distinct or even oppositional shorter-term and longer-term outcomes

Thirty-three participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 51$) demonstrated coping insight pertaining to the potential for coping strategies to be associated with distinct or even oppositional short and long-term outcomes. Participants often observed that avoidance-focussed coping strategies often resulted in short-term relief from the stressor, but longer-term inconvenience such as taking longer to complete academic work or achieve valued goals (e.g., 'By putting off inevitable tasks I applied more stress than I needed for the long term' (P16)). Along similar lines, emotional support was perceived as being effective at relieving distress, but less so at solving immediate problems (e.g., '[I] mostly confide in friends at the college that share my frustrations. While this isn't an immediate fix it does offer me perspective, and shows me others share my perspective' (P73)). Conversely, problem-focussed coping strategies such as 'knuckling down' to complete work often entailed sacrificed sleep or time with loved ones, but longer-term benefits such as being able to make the most of available recreational time afterwards (e.g., 'I tried to complete all the work before I could relax so that my relax time was more beneficial. This was tiresome & led to decreased performance, but lowered prolonged stress levels' (P16)). Participants also commented on the fact that some coping strategies or resources took longer than desired to reach maximal effectiveness (e.g., 'After some time the strategy did distract me so that I was no longer worried... [however] the strategy took some time to be effective' (P32)) or were not sustainable in the medium to longer term (e.g., 'While uncomfortable, I was more efficient. However, this is not sustainable' (P69)).

3.4.4 | Coping insight: Understanding the nuanced interactions between individual strengths and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources

Fifteen participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 20$) demonstrated coping insight pertaining to the nuanced interactions between individual strengths and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources. Most often, these strengths were dispositional traits (e.g., mental toughness, emotional stability, self-sufficiency, sense of humour) or resilient beliefs (e.g., coping self-efficacy) that aided the application of coping strategies or resources (e.g., '[My] ability to use sense of humour [helped me] to look at it from the funny side of things' (P98); '[I learned] that I am able to function on minimal sleep & can push myself past my comfort zone... although there was an initial sense of being overwhelmed, I was able to overcome that' (P10)). In other

cases, participants noted that their intrinsic motivation was a significant driving force underpinning their capacity to cope with stressors (e.g., '[My] motivation to learn was the driving factor' (P1)) or that prior experience in coping with stressors was a strength that aided their future coping (e.g., 'Whenever an issue arises that causes others to be stressed I find that I remain calm as I already know what is expected or what will come. I do not experience the stress that others do because I have experience here in II Class' (P11)).

3.4.5 | Coping insight: Understanding of desired responses or outcomes that align with their personal values

A new coping insight that was not referred to in the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework entailed insight into *desired* responses or outcomes that align with one's personal values. Fifty-five participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 103$) demonstrated coping insight in this domain. Most commonly, participants provided commentary about desirable or ideal behavioural responses that they anticipated would have moved them towards their personally endorsed values (e.g., '[I want to demonstrate] integrity... not screwing people over, just because you got screwed over in the past. If you did something wrong, you own up to it and take measures to fix it or repent for it' (P86)). Further to this, some participants provided commentary about the disjunct between: (1) their *actual* behavioural responses during the same situation, and (2) *desirable* or *ideal* behavioural responses that they would have, in hindsight, preferred to enact during the same situation (e.g., 'In hindsight I am quite disappointed in the way I reacted to the situation as it doesn't align with the type of person I'm trying to be... Ideally I would have liked to reacted [by] acknowledging that the situation is annoying but then switching gears and start looking at the positives' (P104)).

3.5 | Reflective activities and coping insights from future-focus

3.5.1 | Reflective activity: Identification of how One's capacities for resilience may be maintained, changed, or optimised in the future

Sixty-two participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 159$) identified how their capacities for resilience could be maintained, changed, or optimised in the future. For many participants, this involved listing new or existing coping strategies that they wished to apply or re-apply in the future. These included emotion-focussed coping strategies such as seeking social connection or support (e.g., 'Call home more regularly' (P38)), and taking a break or finding a distraction (e.g., '[I should] have study breaks to give my mind a rest' (P22)). This was also accompanied by a desire to utilise appraisal-focussed coping strategies such as accepting the situation (e.g., '[I want to] switch [my] mind into the mode of accepting stress' (P24)). Problem-focussed coping strategies

included applying organisation, preparation or time management strategies and persevering or 'pushing through' the situation (e.g., 'IOT mitigate this & achieve success throughout the day, a more organised evening would help' (P1)). Other participants focussed more on critiquing the implementation of their coping approach, such as by applying their approach earlier (e.g., 'I feel that the situation response was successful and that the only improve would be earlier application' (P12)), applying their approach more regularly (e.g., 'A more instinctual tactical pause mechanism that I automatically apply in all situations, rather than just occasionally' (P223)), or expanding their repertoire (e.g., '[I need to] use it in conjunction with other strategies' (P9)).

3.5.2 | Reflective activity: Identification of existing or required coping resources that may support One's capacities for resilience in the future

Sixty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 128$) identified one or more existing or required coping resources that may support their capacities for resilience in the future. Most often, the resources referred to included: (1) Supports available within the Royal Military College such as peers, instructional staff, chaplains, and the Chain of Command; (2) Supports available outside of the Royal Military College such as partners, friends, and family members, and (3) Health professionals such as psychologists, counsellors, and nurses (e.g., '[I] require some external support, or a confidant to talk about my day-to-day problems' (P73)). Less frequently, participants referred to material or online resources that they hoped to utilise in the future such as diaries or journals, schedules or lesson plans, timers, books, the Internet, Google, YouTube, social media, and access to further training (e.g., 'Within [the] next 3 months [I] will complete some readings and research on the subject to further [my] understanding' (P80)).

3.5.3 | Coping insight: Understanding the anticipated effect of resilient capacities applied in the future

Thirty-one participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 40$) demonstrated coping insight pertaining to the anticipated effect of resilient capacities applied in the future. Most often, this took the form of commentary about the positive outcomes that participants anticipated would occur through the application of coping strategies (e.g., planning) or the development of resources (e.g., physical fitness) that would enhance coping in the future (e.g., 'Taking the time to better prepare the night before will allow for more focus & less stress throughout lessons' (P1); 'Need to be more physically fit to improve ability to make decisions in exertive environments' (P23)). Alternatively, some participants focussed on the negative coping outcomes that could be prevented as a result of certain strategies (e.g., '[I learned] that I must take an active role in controlling my thoughts during periods of high physical demand, or else negative thoughts will dominate my inner narrative' (P96)).

3.5.4 | Coping insight: Understanding the congruence between the type and source of coping resources available, and the anticipated needs of the individual in their future stressor context

Thirty participants ($n_{\text{Instances}} = 41$) demonstrated coping insight pertaining to the congruence between the type and source of coping resources available, and their anticipated needs in a future stressor context. Often this entailed justification about why an identified coping resource was fit for purpose or was anticipated to satisfy a particular need. Some participants noted that a particular social resource was suitable because they possessed relevant subject matter expertise relevant to obtaining advice or information (e.g., 'I could talk to my SGI to confirm my understanding and seek further explanation' (P50)), had relevant experiences (e.g., 'Learning from the way my peers handle stress would prove beneficial as it would allow for an insight into ways to deal with stress from people going through similar things to myself' (P1)), could provide accountability (e.g., 'Ask gf/others to call out negative language' (P32)), or could provide high quality feedback (e.g., '[I receive] good feedback from peers & instructors' (P6)). In other cases, resources were thought to be suitable due to possessing shared values or worldviews (e.g., 'The Padres in particular are people whom I appreciate because of my religious background' (P77)). Less often, participants referred to limitations relating to the suitability of a particular resource, for reasons of accessibility or effectiveness (e.g., '[I] can't talk to peers are they're all super stressed also' (P57)).

4 | DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to identify tangible evidence of reflective activities and coping insights that participants experienced during reflection on the coping process. The Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021) was used to guide and structure a deductive thematic analysis of self-reflection journals completed during a stressful training period. The research was able to reveal the nuanced and idiosyncratic nature of self-reflections on the coping process and the coping insights derived from such reflection in a healthy sample of participants attempting to manage daily stressors and adversity. This has not been previously captured in coping research that typically uses coping scales or when qualitative methods are used to identify coping typologies (e.g., exercise, support seeking; Finlay et al., 2021). The current research helps us to understand why people apply the strategies or access the resources that they do, what people learn from their everyday coping experiences, and how they understand themselves and their experiences in the context of coping. Participants demonstrated the capacity for complex self-reflection on their coping process and the development of self-understanding in the context of coping. Further, even within particular themes, specified as part of the framework, the reflective activities and coping insights were diverse in their nature.

Our findings identified that seven of the eight reflective activities defined in the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework were well represented in participant self-reflections. This is with the exception of one theme identified less frequently: *reappraisal of growth from stressors*. Coping insights were identified less frequently than their corresponding reflective activities, suggesting that these may emerge in a spontaneous or ad libitum manner as participants engage with self-reflective activities and undertake a deeper analysis of their stressor experiences and coping approaches. However, although some coping insights were less common in terms of frequency, they were often rich in complexity and laden with deeper ideas about the self in the context of stressor exposure, broad principles about the nature of stress and coping, and nuanced interpretations regarding the interaction between one's choice of coping approach and broader contextual and intrapersonal factors. This characterisation of coping insight as a less common and yet valuable construct aligns with prior scholarship on the emergence of wisdom via life experience over the course of the lifespan (Glück & Bluck, 2013; Glück et al., 2019).

4.1 | Exploration of the five reflective practices

Participants demonstrated reflective activities related to self-awareness in several domains. This included the identification of their initial reactions to stressors (e.g., emotions and cognitions) and the identification of applied coping strategies or resources (e.g., emotion-focussed coping, access to particular supports). Notably, participants were also able to identify why such strategies or resources were accessed via a reflection on their degree of fit with their personal values and situational context; these tendencies are both considered to be critical for psychological adjustment (Bonanno & Burton, 2013; Hayes et al., 2006). Although coping insights related to self-awareness occurred less frequently, there was clear evidence of awareness of the dynamic nature of emotions over time. This was also demonstrated by understanding when negative emotions may actually increase in intensity due to upcoming future events. Such insights are suggested to support self-preparation (Beitman & Soth McNett, 2006). Moreover, participants articulated specific inter-relationships between reactions, such as how physiological responses were influenced by emotions. When provided with opportunities to consider the behaviour of others, participants also demonstrated the capacity to identify a social dimension to coping. This came in the form of emotional contagion, which is a phenomenon whereby an individual's emotional expression can affect the emotions of others or even facilitate a sense of normalisation or shared stress (Barsade, 2002). In terms of the coping process, participants were able to acknowledge that different coping strategies unfolded over different time courses and some awareness of the between-person differences in coping.

Many participants were able to name the triggering event that cued their stress response. Although fewer participants were able to

articulate insight into patterns of stressors that tended to create stress for them across time or in different situations, many participants were able to interpret why events provoked stress (e.g., due to a loss of control, putting pressure on oneself). This ability to undertake a deeper exploration of the underlying meaning of triggering events is considered to be an important aspect of coping (Kuyken et al., 2011).

In terms of evaluation, participants demonstrated the ability to examine the usefulness of coping strategies or resources adopted in stressful situations. Some participants also cited the nuanced influence of context when attempting to cope, such as when the application of a coping strategy was constrained by situational factors, fatigue, or even a lack of confidence. Participants were also able to identify when the efficacy of strategy might change due to how long it was applied for or that it took time to be effective. The coping insights in this domain align with prior scholarship on the importance of applying coping strategies and resources that are situationally appropriate and fit-for-context across time (Bonanno & Burton, 2013).

Finally, in terms of a focus on the development of future capacities for resilience, participants were able to identify specific modifications to their strategies or resources that they identified would resolve current limitations in their coping process, in line with the iterative nature of strengthening resilience (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021). Coping insight was also evident in this domain relating to why the application of these strategies may be effective, such as by providing more time, increasing focus, or reducing unnecessary or self-imposed stress. Participants also demonstrated an understanding about why particular resources may be useful (e.g., alignment with personal values), in line with the demonstrated importance of alignment between coping resources and recipient needs (Bonanno & Burton, 2013).

Three coping insights were rarely demonstrated in the participant journals: (1) acknowledging the diverse range of coping strategies, resources, or beliefs applied during the coping process, (2) understanding that stressors provide an opportunity for growth across the lifespan, and (3) understanding the nuanced interactions between individual strengths and the effectiveness of coping strategies or resources. These apparent gaps in coping insight could be accounted for by the possibility that some coping insights may emerge in a more protracted manner over the lifespan as a product of life experience or maturity. This notion is supported through recent scholarship on the development of wisdom across the lifespan. Although age in isolation does not automatically culminate in wisdom (Sternberg, 2005), scholars have proposed that wisdom may emerge on the basis of life experience in individuals possessing characteristics that facilitate the emergence of wisdom, such as openness to experience and the propensity for self-reflection (Glück & Bluck, 2013; Glück et al., 2019). A potential implication is that individuals lacking life experience, such as the younger members within this cohort of Officer Cadets, may be less likely to experience some types of coping insight; the moderating role of life experience should be further explored.

There are two alternative explanations that could also account for these apparent gaps in insight. First, the wording of the self-reflection questions in the journals may not have been specific enough so as to elicit these particular coping insights. The inclusion of additional or clearer questions in the journals related to these domains could increase the frequency of particular coping insights. For example, the question 'What role do you think that stressful experiences such as this one have in the broader context of your life?' could stimulate coping insights about the potential for stressors to provide opportunities for growth across the lifetime. Second, it is possible that Cadets experienced coping insight in these domains, but experienced difficulty articulating these ideas in a written form through the self-reflection journals. Supplementing journals with opportunities for coaching or small group reflection could be a potential method for addressing this communication barrier and soliciting more frequent evidence of particular coping insights via alternative methods to writing (e.g., speaking). Further research is required to disentangle these possibilities and identify novel strategies for encouraging coping insights that were found to be rarer in their occurrence in this study.

The goal-focussed nature of Officer training may also account for why coping insights regarding the potential for stressors to promote growth across the lifespan were comparatively rarer in frequency. Officer training is undertaken to qualify as an Officer and therefore the goal is course completion. In this way, training stressors may be more prone to being viewed as a hindrance to training completion, rather than an opportunity for growth. In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that Officer Cadets less frequently identified coping insights related to stressor experiences as an opportunity for growth across the lifespan. This is potentially an insight that is limited whilst one is in the midst of demands, yet emerges as stressors are overcome. Measuring the existence of this coping insight sometime post-stressor may provide greater clarity relating to whether or not this is a coping insight that emerges spontaneously and the nature of such insights (e.g., how stressors are perceived to contribute to growth).

4.2 | Limitations and future directions

There are some limitations with the present research that warrant further consideration. We relied on an analysis of participant self-reflection journals to investigate the self-reflective activities and coping insights that may emerge from engagement with reflective activities. This was potentially limited for three reasons. First, the relatively brief time available to complete the workbook exercises (15 min per journal exercise) and the highly structured nature of the journals may raise concerns for some readers regarding the depth or richness of the data available in the completed journal entries. Further to this, there was a risk that some participants lacked capability or training in how to critically reflect (Dyment & O'Connell, 2014). To mitigate these risks, we provided clear instruction about how to self-reflect in a solution-focussed and constructive manner during both the initial brief and in the

workbooks. Although the limited length and richness of some quotes was a limitation of this study, overall the analysis was able to provide evidence of the self-reflection or coping insight themes identified by the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework or evidence of absent themes. Second, participants may have experienced coping insights cognitively during the intervention, yet could not readily communicate these in a written manner during the completion of their self-reflection journals. Future research could combine an analysis of workbook content with focus groups, interviews, or other data collection methodologies to triangulate these observations and probe more deeply into the reflective activities and coping insights that are less readily conveyed via written communication.

Furthermore, participant concerns about the possibility that their journals would be read by a third party may have constrained their willingness to honestly elaborate about their personal experience of stressor events in a written form (e.g., Day & Thatcher, 2009). This risk was evidenced by the fact that a third of participants did not submit their workbooks for analysis. The instructors in this study attempted to minimise this risk of self-censorship and social desirability bias by explicitly emphasising that all submitted workbooks would be de-identified. Although this step was taken to provide assurance about participant anonymity, this reassurance alone may not have prevented participants from censoring the contents of their journals due to concerns about how they might appear to senior officers or the researchers.

Due to the absence of a control group in this qualitative design, it was not possible to establish a causal link between the SRT training and the reflective activities and coping insights explored in this study. Further, this qualitative design could not determine whether the activities and coping insights written down by the participants were a direct result of the SRT training or were simply a reflection of what participants would think and do during stressful times, regardless of their participation in the SRT training. To explore the possibility of a causal relationship, future randomised controlled trials should evaluate not only the effect of SRT on mental health outcomes (akin to Falon, Karin, et al., 2021), but also the effect of SRT on the 8 reflective activities and 13 coping insights explored in this study.

4.3 | Applied and theoretical implications

This research has several theoretical and applied implications. First, much research has centred on the negative consequences of maladaptive forms of self-reflection for mental health (e.g., brooding; Takano & Tanno, 2009) and focussed on the outcomes of insight for populations living with a clinically diagnosed mental illness (e.g., Johansson et al., 2010). However, there has been a dearth of research into the nature of adaptive self-reflection and coping insight in mentally healthy populations. This study and the theoretical work upon which it is based (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021) are among the first attempts to consider the reflective activities and coping insights that emerge during the process of coping with

stressors in mentally healthy individuals. These efforts may help to differentiate adaptive and maladaptive forms of self-reflection in the context of resilience strengthening and provide a novel perspective about the roles of adaptive self-reflection and coping insight in transforming stressful experiences into resilience-strengthening opportunities.

Second, there are currently no self-report measures available that specifically focus on the quantitative estimation of adaptive self-reflective activities and coping insights that may potentiate the development and refinement of resilient capacities. The findings from the present study, together with the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021), are anticipated to form the basis for the development of a measure of adaptive self-reflective activities and coping insights. Such a measure would enable the future investigation of the mechanisms involved in refining resilient capacities.

Third, this study identified one new coping insight (the understanding of desired responses or outcomes that align with personal values) that was not identified in the original Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework, yet was frequently observed by the researchers in the self-reflection journals. Further research should investigate evidence of this coping insight. As the relevant research is conducted, the findings should subsequently be leveraged to extend the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework.

Fourth, this study has identified reflective activities and coping insights that were rarely observed in the self-reflection journals, but that the broader literature suggests are conducive to the cultivation of resilient capacities (Falon, Kangas, & Crane, 2021). Our understanding of these gaps in the self-reflection journals could enhance future efforts to modify or extend the content of SRT through modifications to the journal itself or through the delivery of supplementary interventions (e.g., one-to-one or group coaching). For example, coaching guides could be developed with probing questions intended to elicit specific coping insights of interest. Randomised controlled trials should subsequently compare these extended versions of SRT to the original version of SRT to clarify whether these programme extensions implicate trends in mental health outcomes over time.

4.4 | Concluding remarks

In this study, we used a literature-derived conceptual framework as the basis for undertaking a guided, qualitative exploration into the relationship between SRT, engagement with self-reflective activities, and the emergence of coping insight. The findings complement and enrich existing quantitative findings from randomised controlled trials by exploring the domains of coping insight that emerge, to varying degrees, during the completion of self-reflection journals. We anticipate that these findings will strengthen future efforts to extend the SRT intervention, extend the Self-Reflection and Coping Insight Framework, and develop an evidence-based measure of self-reflective activity and coping insight.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This reflective practice was originally termed 'stressor reappraisal' by Crane, Searle, et al. (2019) and Falon, Kangas, and Crane (2021). Akin to positive reappraisal as measured by the Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Garnefski et al., 2001) and perspectives relating to stress-as-enhancing mindsets (Jamieson et al., 2018), the term stressor reappraisal was used as a shorthand to describe a specific type of (re)appraisal whereby stressors were reappraised as opportunities for self-development. For clarity, we refer to this construct in the present paper as 'reappraisal of growth from stressors' to define this construct with greater precision and to more effectively distinguish it from other types of reappraisals.

² Should other researchers wish to review the content of the actual workbooks, a copy can be made available by the authors on request.

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