

Original Article

# Understanding the Impact of Bereavement, Coping Strategies and Psychological Well-Being in Young Adolescents: A Correlational Study

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**Conflict of Interest: None.**

Gul S., et al. (2023). 3(2): DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61919/jhrr.v3i2.288>

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Bereavement during adolescence is a critical issue that significantly impacts psychological well-being. Understanding how young individuals cope with the loss of a loved one and how these coping strategies affect their mental health is essential for developing effective support and interventions.

**Objective:** This study aimed to explore the relationship between bereavement, coping strategies, and psychological well-being in young adolescents. It also sought to identify any gender differences in coping mechanisms and psychological outcomes.

**Methods:** A correlational study design was employed, with a purposive sample of 200 adolescents (100 males and 100 females, aged 17-20 years) from five public sector colleges in Punjab. Participants were selected based on having experienced the death of one parent. The study employed a structured questionnaire, which included scales for measuring bereavement, coping strategies, and psychological well-being. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, focusing on descriptive statistics and correlation analysis.

**Results:** The study found a positive correlation between the Emotion Focused Engagement Subscale and the Core Bereavement Items ( $r = .25^{**}$ ), as well as between the Emotion Focused Engagement Subscale and the Images and Thoughts Subscale ( $r = .23^{**}$ ). Additionally, a significant relationship was observed between the Emotion Focused Disengagement Subscale and the Acute Suppression Subscale ( $r = .24^{**}$ ). In terms of coping and psychological well-being, Problem Solving showed a strong positive correlation with the Psychological Well-Being Scale ( $r = .36^{**}$ ), and Cognitive Restructuring was also notably correlated ( $r = .46^{**}$ ). Gender differences were evident in the Autonomy subscale of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale.

**Conclusion:** The study highlights the importance of emotion-focused coping strategies in managing bereavement among adolescents. The identified correlations between specific coping strategies and psychological well-being underscore the need for targeted interventions that focus on these areas. The gender differences observed suggest that tailored approaches may be necessary to address the distinct coping needs of male and female adolescents.

**Keywords:** Bereavement, Adolescents, Coping Strategies, Psychological Well-Being, Gender Differences.

## INTRODUCTION

Bereavement, a period of profound sorrow following the death of a loved one, varies considerably in its manifestation across individuals with different personality perspectives (1). It presents one of the most significant challenges many faces, particularly intense in cases of losing a spouse, sibling, or parent (2)(3). Despite being a natural part of life, the shock and confusion accompanying loss often led to prolonged distress or sadness (4). The psychoanalytic model of bereavement, drawing from Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," offers a notable approach in understanding this phenomenon. Freud posited that grief involves a gradual disengagement of psychological attachment to the deceased, a process that he described as both painful and necessary (5). This 'work of mourning' is completed when the individual detaches emotionally from the deceased, allowing for the investment of emotional energy in new relationships and activities (6).

John Bowlby's attachment theory, blending theological and psychodynamic insights, further elucidates the development of deep emotional bonds throughout an individual's life and the profound reactions, such as protest and tears, following the severance of these bonds (7). Grief work, a concept based on Freud's theory, underscores the importance of acknowledging the reality of death to mitigate prolonged suffering. However, the lack of empirical support for this perspective has raised questions about its effectiveness (8). Stroebe (1991) identified five types of practices for testing grief work but found only minimal evidence supporting its superiority over other coping mechanisms (9). Research by Bonanno and colleagues has challenged traditional assumptions about grief, suggesting that reactions to loss are more varied and complex than previously thought.

The role of cognitive stress theory in bereavement research has gained prominence, particularly in recognizing the role of positive emotions in adapting to loss (10). While traditional bereavement theories emphasized the expression of negative emotions for recovery, recent perspectives consider the activation of positive emotions as equally significant in acknowledging loss and detaching from the deceased (11)(12)(13). Coping strategies, involving both problem-solving and emotion-focused approaches, are crucial in navigating bereavement (14). These strategies can be categorized into active (behavioral or psychological responses to modify the stressor) and avoidant (such as alcohol use or withdrawal), with active coping generally seen as more effective (15)(16). Common methods to overcome bereavement include seeking support from loved ones, finding solace in personal beliefs, participating in support groups, consulting professional advisors, confronting emotions, and maintaining physical well-being (17).

Psychological well-being, encompassing social, emotional, and mental aspects, is crucial in this context. It involves dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and environmental mastery (18). Sustained psychological well-being does not imply constant happiness but includes the ability to navigate and manage painful emotions, an essential component of long-term well-being (19). The multifaceted nature of bereavement, encompassing psychological theories and coping strategies, underscores the complexity of the grief process and the need for a personalized approach to dealing with loss.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

In this research, a correlational study design was implemented to investigate the psychological impacts of parental loss on adolescents. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select a sample of 200 adolescents (100 girls and 100 boys) from five public sector colleges in Punjab. The age range of these participants was 17 to 20 years, with a mean age of 19.01 years (SD = 1.31). The participants were students at the intermediate and graduation levels, encompassing both arts and science disciplines.

The inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: students who had experienced the death of one parent; those studying at intermediate and graduation levels; students from both arts and science streams; and inclusion of both day scholars and hostel residents. The exclusion criteria were more specific, excluding students with any physical disability, those diagnosed with a psychological disorder, students who had experienced the death of both parents, those who had applied for financial support, and students whose both parents were alive.

The study duration spanned six months, during which data was collected and analyzed. Data collection involved administering a structured questionnaire, specifically designed for this study, which included both quantitative and qualitative measures to assess the psychological impact of parental loss. The questionnaire was distributed both in print and digital formats to accommodate the different preferences of the participants.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted on a small group of 20 students who met the same criteria but were not included in the final sample. Adjustments were made based on the feedback from the pilot study.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Descriptive statistics were used to provide a basic understanding of the variables involved. Correlational analyses were then employed to examine the relationships between variables such as age, gender, academic level, and the psychological impacts of parental loss. Inferential statistical methods, including t-tests and ANOVA, were used to compare the responses across different groups and to ascertain any significant differences or patterns. All data analysis adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' responses. The findings were then compiled and interpreted in the context of existing literature on adolescent psychology and bereavement.

## RESULTS

In the study, demographic characteristics of the participants were assessed (refer to Table 1). The sample consisted of 200 adolescents, equally divided by gender with 100 males (50.0%) and 100 females (50.0%). The majority of participants were at the graduation level, comprising 195 students (97.5%), while only 5 students (2.5%) were at the intermediate level. Regarding their living arrangements, a significant portion of the students were day scholars, accounting for 139 individuals (69.5%), while 39 students (19.5%) resided in hostels, and 20 (10.0%) were living with relatives. In terms of parental status, 76 students (38.0%) had lost their

fathers, and 144 students (72.0%) had lost their mothers. The family system of the participants was almost evenly split, with 90 students (45.0%) from joint families and 110 (55.0%) from nuclear families.

The correlation between bereavement and coping strategies was analyzed and is detailed in Table 2. A significant positive correlation was found between Problem Solving (PS) and Social Contact (SoC) at .23\*\*, as well as between PS and Self-Criticism (SC) at .18\*\*. Additionally, Express Emotions (EE) was positively correlated with Emotion Focused Engagement (EFE) at .25\*\*.

Further analysis on the correlation between coping strategies and psychological wellbeing, shown in Table 3, revealed multiple significant relationships. Problem Solving (PS) was strongly positively correlated with the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS) at .36\*\*, Emotional Mastery (EM) at .29\*\*, and Personal Growth (PG) at .25\*\*. Cognitive Restructuring (CR) also showed strong positive correlations with PWBS at .46\*\*, EM at .39\*\*, PG at .34\*\*, and Purpose in Life (PIL) at .27\*\*. In addition, Express Emotions (EE) demonstrated a positive correlation with EM at .23\*\*. On the contrary, Social Withdrawal (SW) was negatively correlated with PWBS at -.21\*\*. Problem Focused Engagement (PFE) displayed a strong positive correlation with PWBS at .47\*\* and also with Emotion Focused Engagement (EFE) at .24\*\*. Lastly, Emotion Focused Disengagement (EFD) showed a negative correlation with PWBS at -.24\*\*.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N=200)

Variable	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	100 (50.0)
Female	100 (50.0)
Education Level	
Intermediate	5 (2.5)
Graduation	195 (97.5)
Residence	
Day Scholar	139 (69.5)
Hostel	39 (19.5)
Living with Relative	20 (10.0)
Parental Status	
Father Deceased	76 (38.0)
Mother Deceased	144 (72.0)
Family System	
Joint	90 (45.0)
Nuclear	110 (55.0)

Table 2 Significant Correlations between Bereavement and Coping Strategies (N = 200)

Correlation Between	Correlation Coefficient
Problem Solving (PS) and Social Contact (SoC)	.23**
Problem Solving (PS) and Self-Criticism (SC)	.18**
Express Emotions (EE) and Emotion Focused Engagement (EFE)	.25**

Table 3 Significant Correlations between Coping Strategies and Psychological Wellbeing (N = 200)

Correlation Between	Correlation Coefficient
Problem Solving (PS) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)	.36**
Problem Solving (PS) and Emotional Mastery (EM)	.29**
Problem Solving (PS) and Personal Growth (PG)	.25**
Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)	.46**
Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Emotional Mastery (EM)	.39**
Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Personal Growth (PG)	.34**
Cognitive Restructuring (CR) and Purpose in Life (PIL)	.27**

Correlation Between	Correlation Coefficient
Express Emotions (EE) and Emotional Mastery (EM)	.23**
Social Withdrawal (SW) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)	-.21**
Problem Focused Engagement (PFE) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)	.47**
Problem Focused Engagement (PFE) and Emotion Focused Engagement (EFE)	.24**
Emotion Focused Disengagement (EFD) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWBS)	-.24**

These findings, through the various correlations identified, provide valuable insights into the coping strategies and psychological wellbeing of adolescents undergoing bereavement.

## DISCUSSION

The study primarily investigated the relationship between bereavement, coping strategies, and psychological well-being among young adolescents. The results demonstrated a notable positive correlation between the Emotion Focused Engagement Subscale and the Core Bereavement Items, as well as between the Emotion Focused Engagement Subscale and the Images and Thoughts Subscale. Furthermore, a significant association was observed between the Emotion Focused Disengagement Subscale and the Acute Suppression Subscale. These findings align with existing research, such as that conducted by Vandenberg (20), which also identified a significant relationship between various coping strategies and bereavement, suggesting that grief and low moods can drive individuals towards adopting coping mechanisms.

Moreover, the study revealed a partial but significant relationship between different scales of the coping inventory and psychological well-being, echoing the results of Pallant and Lae (2002) (21). Specifically, problem-focused coping strategies were found to be effective in aiding adolescents in managing adversities. However, a notable gender difference was observed in the Autonomy subscale of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale, as also reported in another Western study (22). This variance may be attributed to the numerous factors that impact the psychological well-being of males and females, especially considering the tumultuous nature of adolescence marked by significant developmental changes and emotional fluctuations.

The study's strengths lie in its comprehensive exploration of the intricate dynamics between bereavement and coping strategies in adolescents, a topic of significant relevance given the developmental challenges of this age group. However, the study is not without limitations. The sample was restricted to a specific age group and geographical location, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study precludes the establishment of causality.

For future research, it is recommended to include a more diverse sample encompassing different age groups and cultural backgrounds to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial to understand the long-term effects of bereavement and the efficacy of different coping strategies over time. Investigating gender differences in coping strategies and psychological well-being could provide deeper insights, particularly in the context of the developmental challenges unique to adolescence. This research contributes to the broader understanding of how young individuals navigate the complex process of bereavement, highlighting the critical role of coping strategies in fostering psychological resilience and well-being.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the intricate relationship between bereavement, coping strategies, and psychological well-being in young adolescents. The positive correlations found between emotion-focused engagement and core bereavement items, as well as other coping subscales, align with previous research and emphasize the significance of adaptive coping mechanisms in the face of grief. The noted gender differences in the Autonomy subscale of the Psychological Wellbeing Scale point to the nuanced ways in which gender may influence coping during adolescence, a period marked by profound emotional and developmental changes. These findings have important implications for developing targeted interventions and support systems for bereaved adolescents. By understanding the specific coping strategies that correlate with improved psychological well-being, educators, counsellors, and healthcare professionals can tailor their approaches to better assist young individuals in navigating the challenges of bereavement, ultimately contributing to their resilience and mental health. Furthermore, acknowledging the gender differences in coping and well-being could lead to more personalized and effective support services, thereby addressing the unique needs of adolescents during a critical period of their development.

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