

## Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to study the relationship between purpose in life and stress coping strategies among youth. Purpose in life is an accomplishing intention which is generalized and stable that is meaningful to oneself and beyond oneself to the world. It can be understood as a central and self-organizing life aim. Stress coping strategies are the ways through which an organism abates the intensity of stressor, by devoting the sensible efforts or developing tolerance towards stress and conflicts. The research design is descriptive and quantitative in nature. The sample of the study comprised of 128 unmarried individuals (64 males and 64 females) in the age range of 18 to 25. The sampling method used in the research study was convenient sampling and the data collection for the study was done using Google Forms through the questionnaires namely, Brief cope Inventory and Purpose in life scale. The study findings revealed that males use more maladaptive ways to cope with stressors. Dysfunctional/Maladaptive coping negatively affects the purpose in life; and Adaptive coping positively predicts purpose in life for both males and females. If an individual employs more adaptive coping strategies including problem and emotion focused coping, higher purpose in life is predicted. Hence, adoption of adaptive coping styles, especially for males is recommended through the research findings.

**Keywords:** *Purpose in life, Stress Coping Strategies, Adaptive Coping, Maladaptive Coping, Problem focused coping, Emotion focused coping*

Purpose of life is a vital, self-organizing life aspiration. It motivates, guides the decisions and choices one makes, define one's goal, provides direction, which ultimately creates meaningful life. It is also specified as an accomplishing intention which is generalized and stable that is meaningful to oneself and beyond oneself to the rest of the world (Diamon et al., 2003). The three components of purpose are: a nature which is stable and wide-ranging; a facet that looks beyond oneself and it involves attainment, advancement, or accomplishment.

Stress is resulted when body's homeostasis is challenged (Selye, 1956). The body's homeostasis needs to be constant with changing environment to maintain our lives (Bernard,

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## Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth

1961). Coping is the way through which an organism abates the intensity of stressor, by devoting the sensible efforts or developing tolerance towards stress and conflicts.

Transactional theory of stress and coping given by *Folkman and Lazarus* in 1966 talks about two components namely *appraisal* and *coping* which helps an organism to manage stressful events. The theory defines psychological stress as the result of an individual's resources that he or she uses to deal with the demands of the stressor after assessing it in the environment being insufficient to meet the current demands posed by the stressor (Lazarus and Folkman 1986).

Two forms of appraisal are distinguished in this theory namely *Primary Appraisal* and *Secondary Appraisal*. When the relevance of event is evaluated to the well-being, the individual is in primary appraisal state and when the coping options are evaluated for the same, it is called as Secondary appraisal (Lazarus, 1966). When stimuli are judged to be threatening, difficult, or harmful, emotions are elicited, as well as coping strategies are implemented to ameliorate the resulting stress and emotional reactions associated (Biggs et al., 2017). Coping can either be *Problem focused* wherein the individual looks beyond negative emotions or stress to alter the person-environment reality or it can be *Emotion-focused* the individual tries to appraise the situation differently, decrease the negative emotional state, or basically dealing with the internal elements (Krohne, 2001). In 1997, Carver combined emotion focused and problem focused under the domain of *Adaptive coping* which includes strategies of acceptance, emotional social support, humor, positive reframing, religion, active coping, instrumental support and planning. He also put forth strategies under *Maladaptive/ dysfunctional coping* namely, behavioural disengagement, denial, self-distraction, self-blaming, and substance use.

*Madhyastha et al., (2014)* conducted a study gender difference in stress and coping in third year medical students, using brief cope scale and Professional student stress survey on 94 students, found that the scores on instrumental and emotional support seeking to cope were greater for females compared to males, and humour, self-blame scores to be higher for males. Academic performance and professional identity were discovered to be the most significant source of stress. *Misigo (2015)*, conducted a study on Kenyan students to determine gender differences in perceived stress and coping strategies, from three public universities found that greater stress levels in females, and they seek help more often than men, who rely more on drugs and alcohol to handle stress. Study conducted by *Gentry et al. (2017)* who conducted research to determine the differences in stress and coping styles between adult males and females, in Hawaii, reported that females' perceived stress levels were more, but no variations in their perceived ability to deal. They discovered that females use more adaptive coping while males use more maladaptive coping, so they proposed a suggestion for males to use more adaptive coping strategies such as exercise and active confrontation with the sources of stress. Similarly, a research study by *Anbumalar et al., (2017)*, to know the levels of perceived stress and how coping strategies differ among two genders, showed that though females scored high in perceived stress but males use more smoking, anger, and thinking to solve the problem.

*Halama and Peter (2014)*, conducted a research study to know whether meaning in life can act as buffer against stress, they found that if an individual possesses greater meaning in life, it prevents them from depression and from using negative coping strategies. They concluded that there are three ways in how the type of coping individual use is affected by meaning in life. The ways are the resources that give meaning to individual and also helps in coping; life

## Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth

meaningfulness acting as buffer for individual against undesirable consequence of stress; and when an individual uses the meaning-based coping for instance benefit findings, positive reinterpretation, which helps to adjust an individual during and after stressful event by improving the psychological well-being. *Park and Baumeister (2015)*, conducted a study to determine that adjustment to life's stresses is related to life meaning and discovered that perception of life meaningfulness is related to levels of perceived stress. Participants with lower meaning in life reported higher stress levels than those with higher meaning. Individuals who have a threatened meaning of life have a different experience of stress than those who have an intact meaning of life. The study also concludes that when life is perceived as meaningful, it serves as a shield against life's stress. *Miao et al., (2016)*, in a diary study to determine how proactive coping could be predicted by meaning in life via positive affect, and it was discovered that positive emotions can be predicted by daily sense of meaning. The findings showed that meaning in one's life influences proactive coping, and that the connection between the two is mediated by positive affect.

### Objectives

- To study purpose in life and stress coping strategies among youth.
- To investigate gender differences in life purpose and stress coping strategies among youth.
- To study the relation among the measures of purpose in life and stress coping strategies among male and female participants.
- To study stress coping strategies as predictors of the sense of purpose in life among male and female participants.

### Hypothesis

- There would be significant gender differences on the measures of purpose in life and stress coping strategies among youth.
- There would be significant relation among the measures of purpose in life and stress coping strategies among male and female participants.
- Purpose in life would be significantly predicted by Stress coping strategies among male participants.
- Purpose in life would be significantly predicted by Stress coping strategies among female participants.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

The sample of this study comprised of aggregate 128 individuals bifurcated into 64 males and 64 females in the age range of 18 to 25 years from Delhi NCR. The method of sampling used in this research was Convenient Sampling. The data collection mode used in this research was Google Forms.

### Measures

Two questionnaires namely purpose in life and brief coping Inventory, along with some basic demographic questions were used to gather data for the study. The description of the scales is given below:

1. **Purpose in life Questionnaire:** Craumbaugh and Maholick created the Purpose in Life Questionnaire (PIL) in 1964. The questionnaire consists of 20-items which measure various dimensions of life purposes. The participant has to rate oneself on 7-point scale, for every statement. The composite score on purpose in life scale, can

## Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth

range from 20 to 140 points, which is by adding the score of every statement. The scale is appropriate both for clinical and non-clinical groups (Hutzell & Peterson, 1986). The validity of the scale is supported by re-testing and factor analysis. On the sample size of 197, the coefficient of split-half correlation came out to be 0.85, .092 as yielded by spearman brown formula, reflecting the reliable nature of scale.

- Brief Cope Inventory:** It is self-report questionnaire with 28-items that assesses types of stress-coping strategies used by an individual. Charles S Carver created the inventory in 1997. There are 14 subscales, each with two items. Each item has four possible responses which are “not at all”, “a little bit”, “a medium amount”, “a lot”. The Indian adaptation of Brief Cope inventory named as Coping behaviour assessment scale has Cronbach’s Alpha to be 0.82, the Guttman’s split half coefficient to be 0.71, shows the high reliability of the scale. The Pearson coefficient of correlation (r) is 0.78 to evaluate convergent validity by investigating its correlation to Carver's Brief Cope Scale.

### Procedure

For conducting the research, sixty-four male and sixty-four female participants were taken. The respondents were asked for explicit consent and informed more about objective and implications of the research. Following that, participants then completed the online Google form survey titled Purpose in Life Scale and Brief Cope Inventory. After getting the survey filled, the scoring of each form was done. After scoring, the data was entered in SPSS software. After entering the data, descriptive statistics were used to draw result and conclusion about the findings. After drawing the results, interpretation of the result was done.

## RESULTS

Keeping in view the objectives of the study, the data was analyzed by Descriptive and Inferential statistical Techniques. The t-test was used to investigate gender differences between male and female groups. Inter co-relation among dependent measures of purpose in life, dysfunctional coping, problem focused coping and emotion focused were analyzed with the help of Product Moment of Coefficient Correlation. Multiple Regression analysis (Enter Method) was used to study the coping strategies as predictors of purpose in life for male and female sample.

*Table - 1 Showing Mean, standard error of difference, t- value and p-value of male and female group for the various dependent measures*

| Measures               | Groups | Mean    | St. error of difference | t-value | p-value     |
|------------------------|--------|---------|-------------------------|---------|-------------|
| Purpose in life        | Male   | 98.188  | 3.264                   | 1.728   | .086        |
|                        | Female | 103.828 |                         |         |             |
| Dysfunctional Coping   | Male   | 26.328  | 1.063                   | 2.294   | <b>.023</b> |
|                        | Female | 23.891  |                         |         |             |
| Problem Focused Coping | Male   | 15.734  | .663                    | 1.509   | .134        |
|                        | Female | 16.734  |                         |         |             |
| Emotion focused Coping | Male   | 25.031  | .989                    | 1.816   | .072        |
|                        | Female | 26.828  |                         |         |             |
| Adaptive coping        | Male   | 40.776  | 1.47038                 | 1.902   | .059        |
|                        | Female | 43.563  |                         |         |             |

**Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth**

*Table - 2 Showing inter co-relations of various dependent measures for the total sample (N=128)*

*MODEL-1 Showing predictor variables and dependent variable (Purpose in life) for males*

| MODEL- 1             |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Predictor variables  | Dependent variable |
| Dysfunctional Coping | Purpose in life    |
| Adaptive coping      |                    |

*Table – 3 showing predictor variables, std. error, t-value, p-value, beta coefficient, R, partial co-relation of various predictor variables for purpose in life for males*

| Predictor variables  | Std. error | t-value | p-value | Beta coefficient | R    | Partial co-relation |
|----------------------|------------|---------|---------|------------------|------|---------------------|
| Dysfunctional Coping | .379       | 3.060   | .003    | -.399            | .477 | -.365               |
| Adaptive coping      | .288       | 4.083   | .000    | .354             |      | .463                |

*R Square = .228; Adjusted R Square= .203; Std. Error of the Estimate= 17.46; DF= 2,61*

*ANOVA for multiple regression analysis of purpose in life for males*

| Source of variation | Sum of scores | DF | Mean sum of Squares | F- value |
|---------------------|---------------|----|---------------------|----------|
| Regression          | 5492.341      | 2  | 2746.170            | 9.008    |
| Residual            | 18597.409     | 61 | 304.876             |          |
| Total               | 24089.750     | 63 |                     |          |

| Measures               | Purpose in life | Dysfunctional Coping | Problem focused Coping | Emotion focused Coping | Adaptive coping |
|------------------------|-----------------|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------|
| Purpose in life        | -               | -.233**              | .280**                 | .288**                 | .319**          |
| Dysfunctional Coping   | -               | -                    | .310**                 | .265**                 | .317**          |
| Problem Focused Coping | -               | -                    | -                      | .576**                 | .836**          |
| Emotion focused Coping | -               | -                    | -                      | -                      | .930**          |
| Adaptive coping        | -               | -                    | -                      | -                      | -               |

*MODEL- 2 Showing predictor variables and dependent variable (Purpose in life) for females*

| MODEL – 2            |                    |
|----------------------|--------------------|
| Predictor variables  | Dependent variable |
| Dysfunctional Coping | Purpose in life    |
| Adaptive coping      |                    |

**Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth**

*Table – 4 showing predictor variables, std. error, t-value, p-value, beta coefficient, R, partial co-relation of various predictor variables for purpose in life for females*

| Predictor variables  | Std. error | t-value | p-value | Beta coefficient | R    | Partial co-relation |
|----------------------|------------|---------|---------|------------------|------|---------------------|
| Dysfunctional Coping | .383       | 3.256   | .002    | -.376            | .455 | -.385               |
| Adaptive coping      | .258       | 2.786   | .007    | .322             |      | .336                |

*R Square = .207; Adjusted R Square= .181; Std. Error of the Estimate= 15.657; DF= 2,61*

*ANOVA for multiple regression analysis of purpose in life for females*

| Source of variation | Sum of scores | DF | Mean sum of Squares | F- value |
|---------------------|---------------|----|---------------------|----------|
| Regression          | 3897.690      | 2  | 1948.845            | 7.949    |
| Residual            | 14955.419     | 61 | 245.171             |          |
| Total               | 18853.109     | 63 |                     |          |

**DISCUSSION**

The study explored the relationship between purpose in life and stress coping strategies among youth.

**Hypothesis 1** (There would be significant gender differences on the measures of purpose in life and stress coping strategies among youth) is accepted for the significant difference in the mean values for stress coping strategies, that is, males scored greater than females on the measures of dysfunctional coping (26.33 > 23.89), which suggests that they employ dysfunctional coping to manage their stressors such as behavioural disengagement, Denial, self-blame, Venting, Substance use and distraction. Whereas the mean value of females is greater than males on the measure of purpose in life, problem focused, emotion focused and adaptive coping. (see Gentry et al, 2017; Anbumalar et al., 2017; Misigo, 2015; Madhyasatha et al., 2014)

**Hypothesis 2**, (There would be significant relation among the measures of purpose in life and stress coping strategies among male and female participants) is accepted, since purpose in life is significantly negatively correlated with dysfunctional coping, implying an opposite relationship between the two, i.e., if one utilizes more dysfunctional coping strategies, one's purpose in life is lower, and vice versa; whereas purpose in life is positively and significantly correlated with problem focused, emotion focused, and adaptive coping. It denotes one's life's purpose, increases with adaptive coping strategies employed to manage stress and vice-versa. Dysfunctional coping is positively correlated with Problem focused, emotion focused and adaptive coping. Problem focused, emotion focused and adaptive coping significantly positively correlate with each other. (see Miao et al., 2016; Baumeister and Park, 2015; Halama and Peter, 2014)

**Hypothesis 3** (Purpose in life would be significantly predicted by Stress coping strategies among male participants), is accepted since purpose in life is significantly predicted by dysfunctional and adaptive coping in males, as F value (9.008,  $p < .000$ ) was concluded to be highly significant. Furthermore, the acquired value of  $R^2 = 0.228$  indicated that the proportion of variance in the dependent variable experienced by the regression model is 23%; hence the model fit well to study the population. Further 40 % variance is explained by

## Purpose In Life in Relation to Stress Coping Strategies: An Exploratory Study of Youth

dysfunctional coping and 35.4% variance by adaptive coping variables in prediction of purpose in life.

**Hypothesis 4** (Purpose in life would be significantly predicted by Stress coping strategies among female participants), is accepted since purpose in life is significantly predicted by dysfunctional and adaptive coping in females, as F value (7.949,  $p < .000$ ) was found to be highly significant. In addition, the obtained value of  $R^2 = 0.207$  indicated that the proportion of variance in the dependent variable experienced by the regression model is 21%; hence the model fit well to study the population. Further 37.6 % variance is explained by dysfunctional coping and 32.2% variance by adaptive coping variables in prediction of purpose in life.

The results demonstrate that in both genders, unhealthy ways of coping negatively predict sense of purpose; that is, as dysfunctional coping increases in both genders, their purpose in life declines, whereas the use of adaptive coping increases meaning in life in both genders. One could argue that by employing specific adaptive coping strategies like acceptance, positive reframing, planning, use of emotional support, humor, religion, active coping, instrumental support, one can develop more meaningful and purposeful life.

### CONCLUSION

On the basis of research, it is concluded that as compared to females, males use more dysfunctional or maladaptive ways of dealing with stress. Purpose in life is significantly negatively correlated with dysfunctional coping and significantly positively correlated with Problem focused, emotion focused and adaptive coping. Both genders have a significant positive correlation between problem focused coping, emotion focused coping, and adaptive coping; and in both cases, a significant positive correlation is present among life purpose, emotion focused coping, and adaptive coping. Adaptive coping positively predicted life purpose, while dysfunctional coping negatively predicted it.

### Limitations and Suggestions

Review of literature can be more specific and elaborated. The sampling technique is limited to convenient sampling. Single psychological variable of Stress coping strategies was included to predict the robust concept of purpose in life. Biographical variables other than gender were not analyzed. In addition to quantitative analysis, some qualitative analysis should be added in order to get more insight into the construct of purpose in life.

### Implications of Research

The awareness of stress coping strategies used by an individual is crucial not only at youth level but for people of all ages, only after which another process of choosing the efficient means of handling stressors is possible. Expression of emotions especially for males, has been a taboo, it should be openly acknowledged by giving a trustful, supportive environment to them, whenever possible so that by time, these emotions don't build enough leading to violent outburst or maladaptive ways to manage them. Indulging in reflective self-questions, is one of a way to introspect and understand oneself, one's goals, aspirations, so that, one can direct towards more meaningful and purposeful life, which again enhance the employment of efficient coping strategies.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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