

## Exploring the Relationship Between Coping and Psychological Well-Being among Indian College Students

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between coping and psychological well-being among urban Indian students. Mental health concerns about this group of population have necessitated understanding their coping behavior. The study found that there is a significant relationship between coping and psychological well-being which could contribute to developing better approaches in identification and intervention for students in the future.

**Keywords:** Coping, Psychological Well-being, psychosocial, college students, India

Mental health challenges are a growing cause for concern among Indian college-going students who fall into the young adult population. India is the only country in the world with the highest youth population. The United Nations defines youth as between 15-24 years of age. United Nations Population Fund for Activities, India projects India to continue experiencing a youth bulge. College students in India are faced with multiple psychosocial challenges that account for increasing mental health concerns. The condition worsened during the Covid19 pandemic with the Indian youth in particular experiencing symptoms of depression (Verma, Verma & Kapur, 2021). A post-pandemic understanding of the psychological challenges being faced by the Indian college-going population is important to understand the extent of coping and create suitable intervention strategies. The effects continue to linger and change in coping strategies are pervading all aspects of life as a long term effect. Today the concern is that college going students should embrace positive coping strategies like problem solving and seek social support rather than opt for negative coping strategies like self criticism, anxiety or withdrawal.

Coping refers to thoughts and behavior mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). American Psychological Association (2023) says that coping refers to a stress-management strategy where a person actively seeks to alter external conditions, including environmental events and other people's behavior, to bring them into line with their wishes. Primary coping refers to and includes a variety of different actions, such as seeking support, expressing one's emotions, or regulating one's feelings. An examination of associations between dispositional and situational tendencies in a study of

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coping resulted in the COPE inventory (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989) which was shortened to the Brief-COPE used in this study.

Psychological well-being indicates a positive state of mind. It is a concept that has gained importance and is something individuals aspire to. Psychological well-being consists of self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, a feeling of purpose and meaning in life, and personal growth and development according to Carol Ryf (1998). There are different definitions however the core feature is that mental health includes resilience and fulfillment. The college-going population goes through a period of transition from adolescence to adulthood, in the current Indian socio-cultural scenario it is important to understand their challenges in maintaining psychological well-being. India being a vast demographic often loses sight of this vulnerable age group. Amidst the demands of social norms there is also a need for individual growth, the difficulties in emerging unscathed often lie in the coping strategies that are adopted. Therefore, it is with due concern that psychological and psychosocial research should focus on building an in-depth understanding of the psychological well-being of college going student population in India.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Brief-COPE inventory is currently one of the most frequently used and best-validated measures of coping strategies. It assesses the different ways in which people respond to stress. Ryf (1989) presented a model of psychological well-being (PWB) that encompassed six dimensions of well-being: autonomous functioning and decision-making, mastery of one's environment, seeking opportunities for personal growth, maintaining positive relations with others, having a sense of purpose in life and accepting and thinking positively about one's self. It indicates outcomes of increased and higher social support, greater life satisfaction, and improved physiological health (Ryf, 2008). The prevalence of psychological well-being during the college-going years has not been researched adequately in the Indian population.

### *Background*

In India, a relatively low amount of research has been conducted on the college-going population. A review of the literature indicates that among Indian youth pro active coping, avoidance coping, preventive coping, and emotional support seeking were significant predictors of various dimensions of psychological well-being (Kumar & Bharti, 2018). Azmi (2021) studied Indian adolescents in college and found that associations exist between the different coping mechanisms used in stressful situations and that maladaptive coping style is related to low psychological well-being. A recent study of college students in Kashmir studied the relationship between perceived social support as well as well-being and found a positive correlation (Kachroo & Ramanathan, 2023). Jagad (2020) studied the psychological well-being and mental health of students concerning family type, the results showed family type did not affect the mental well-being and mental health of students. A study among Pakistani teenagers found that perceived social support is a significant predictor of psychological well-being (Batoool & Ahmed, 2014). Research on perceived psychological support and psychological well-being among Nepalese adolescents found that perceived social support indirectly affects psychological well-being through the mediating role of self-esteem (Poudel, Gurung & Khanal, 2020). Correlations were significantly positive for positive well-being and anxiety scores, general health, and, self-control scores among college students in Tamilnadu (Palaniswamy & Illango, 2022). A study of college students from north and south India found that happiness was conceptualized in terms of the need for

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satisfaction and well-being, leisure activities and time spent with family determined the happiness of the participants, it was also found that participants from institutions that offered mental health initiatives reported higher well-being than others (Reddy, 2023).

The extent to which Indian university students with high or low depressive symptoms, used coping strategies was studied, and it appeared that the high depressive symptom group resorted to avoidant coping strategies than the low depressive symptom group (Sawhney, Kunen & Gupta, 2020). As far as research on coping among Indian students is concerned, research peaked during and after the COVID-19 pandemic as seen in studies by Rajiv & Harikrishnan (2021), Sinha et al (2000), Shuster et al (2023) that focussed on coping challenges among college students as well coping mechanisms. Barman et al (2023) confirmed a moderate level of stress among college students in Shillong, Meghalaya, and the study also identified the primary coping styles.

### *Research Hypothesis*

The research hypothesis of this study is as follows:

- There is a significant relationship between coping and psychological well-being among Indian college students and to investigate if there are any gender differences.

### *Aims*

The aims of the study:

- To assess the level of coping among college students.
- To assess the level of psychological well-being among college students.
- To assess the relationship between coping and psychological well-being among college students.
- To assess gender difference in coping among college students.
- To assess gender differences in psychological well-being among college students.

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

### *Design*

- Purposive sampling technique
- Correlational study
- Data collection: Through offline interviews and Google Forms.

### *Participants*

The study has been done on the population of the age group of 16-23 years. Of the 120 participants, 60 were male and 60 were female.

### **Inclusion criteria**

- Indian college students of the age group 16-23 years of age
- College students at pre-university, undergraduate and postgraduate levels
- Individuals with the knowledge of English

### **Exclusion criteria**

- Individuals with intellectual disabilities
- Individuals undergoing therapy

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### *Instruments*

Demographic data was collected through a self-report questionnaire. It included items asking questions about the following information: age, sex, academic program, year etc. The tools used were:

### **Coping**

Coping Orientation to Problems Experienced Inventory (Brief-COPE) (Carver, 1997):

The Brief-COPE is a 28 item self-report questionnaire designed to measure effective and ineffective ways to cope with a stressful life event. This scale determines one's primary coping styles through scores on subscales of problem focused coping, emotional focused coping and avoidant coping. It also reports other facets of coping like self-distraction, denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, emotional support, venting, humour, acceptance, self-blame, religion, active coping, use of instrumental support, positive reframing and planning.

### **Psychological Well Being**

Psychological Well-Being Scale developed by Carol D. Ryff (1989): the 42-item Psychological Well Being (PWB) Scale measures six aspects of wellbeing and happiness: autonomy (e.g., "I have confidence in my opinions even if they are contrary to general consensus"), environmental mastery (e.g., "In general I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live"), personal growth (e.g., "I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world"), positive relations with others (e.g., "People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others"), purpose in life (e.g., "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them") and self-acceptance (e.g., "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out").

### *Procedure*

The study was executed with the informed consent of all participants. The participants were informed of the objectives of the study and assured of confidentiality. The questionnaires were administered individually.

### *Data Analysis*

Descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistical techniques were used.

### *Sample size*

The sample size is 120.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The results of this study indicated several important aspects. Given below are the findings, beginning with demographic details of gender and geographical location as shown, followed by the statistical analyses.

**Table 1: Percentage distribution of socio-demographic variable of gender**

Male	50%
Female	50%

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Table 1 and table 2 indicate the demographic data. Table 1 shows the distribution of gender which was one of the socio demographic variables of this study. In this study the participants were equally distributed.

**Table 2: Percentage distribution for the socio-demographic variable of place**

Guwahati	53%
Bengaluru	37%
Hyderabad	10%

Table 2 shows the distribution of the sample across various cities in India. From the table it is seen that 53% were from Guwahati, 37% from Bengaluru and 10% from Hyderabad. The sample was evenly obtained from urban, English speaking college students.

As relevant to this study, below are the tables giving the results of the descriptive statistics, normality test, correlation coefficient scores and results of the test for gender differences.

Table 3 gives a total mean score of the sample which is 71.92 for Brief-COPE and 82.02 for Psychological Well-being. The standard deviation is 1.04 for Brief-COPE and 1.10 for Psychological Well Being.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics for the total score (N=120)**

Descriptive statistics	Mean	S.D	Standard Errors
<b>Brief-COPE</b>	<b>71.92</b>	<b>1.14</b>	<b>1.04</b>
<b>Psychological Well-being</b>	<b>82.02</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>1.00</b>

Table 3 gives a total mean score of the sample which is 71.92 for Brief-COPE and 82.02 for Psychological Well-being. The standard deviation is 1.04 for Brief-COPE and 1.10 for Psychological Well Being.

**Table 4: Normality Test**

	Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistics	df	Sig.
<b>Brief-COPE Total</b>	.977	120	.038
<b>Psychological-Well Being Total</b>	.970	120	.009

Table 4 gives the Shapiro-Wilk statistic score of .977 in Brief-Cope with a significance level of .038 which is above the p value that is 0.05. The overall statistical score for Psychological Well-Being is .970 with a significance level of .009 which is above the p value that is 0.05. The scores of the population were normally distributed and hence the parametric test was considered.

**Table 5: Correlation coefficient scores for total Brief-COPE and Psychological Well Being**

Variables	N	Mean	S.D	Brief-COPE	Psychological Well-being
<b>Brief-COPE</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>71.92</b>	<b>1.14</b>	-	<b>-.312</b>
<b>Psychological well-being</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>82.02</b>	<b>1.10</b>	<b>-.312</b>	-

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Table 5 indicates a positive correlation coefficient value of -0.312 reflecting positive association between coping and psychological well-being. From the results it is evident that coping and psychological well-being are significantly related concepts among healthy Indian college students. The correlation analysis gives clear indication that coping is significantly positively associated with psychological well-being along with almost all the dimensions of psychological well-being (i.e., autonomy, personal growth, positive relation, purpose in life, and self-acceptance) except environmental mastery.

Table 6 gives the results of the Mann-Whitney test for gender differences in Brief-COPE. The mean ranks are 58.41 and 62.59 while the sum of ranks are 3504.50 and 3755.50 respectively.

**Table 6: Results of Mann-Whitney Test for gender difference in Brief –COPE**

<b>RANKS:</b>			
<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Sum of ranks</b>
<b>Brief-COPE</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>58.41</b>	<b>3504.50</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>62.59</b>	<b>3755.50</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>		

Table 6 gives the results of the Mann-Whitney test for gender differences in Brief-COPE. The mean ranks are 58.41 and 62.59 while the sum of ranks are 3504.50 and 3755.50 respectively.

**Table 7: Results of Mann-Whitney Test for gender difference in Psychological Well-Being**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean Rank</b>	<b>Sum of Ranks</b>
<b>Psychological Well-being</b>			
<b>1</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>56.86</b>	<b>3411.50</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>64.14</b>	<b>3848.50</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>120</b>		

Table 7 shows the mean rank of males in Psychological Well-Being is 56.86 and mean rank for female is 64.14, which indicates that there is no significant difference in Psychological Well-being across gender for college students.

The 42-item Psychological Well-Being (PWB) Scale measures six aspects of wellbeing and happiness: autonomy (e.g., “I have confidence in my opinions even if they are contrary to general consensus”), environmental mastery (e.g., “In general I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live”), personal growth (e.g., I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how you think about yourself and the world”), positive relations with others (e.g., “People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others”), purpose in life (e.g., “Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them”) and self-acceptance (e.g., “ When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out”). The Brief-COPE analyses levels of coping with subscales on problem focused coping, emotional focused coping and avoidant coping. It also reports other facets of coping like self-distraction, denial, substance use, behavioral

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disengagement, emotional support, venting, humour, acceptance, self-blame, religion, active coping, use of instrumental support, positive reframing and planning. The purpose of the study was to assess the Coping and Psychological well-Being among Indian college students and the results show that there is a positive association which between coping and psychological well-being.

### DISCUSSION

The main key findings of the present research indicate that when the individual perceives a higher level of coping, psychological well-being is also observed to be increased and vice-versa. It is seen that there is non-significant relation between gender and the two variables. This is an interesting finding as it paves the way for providing intervention to students. A recent study of Indian college students found that stress has a significant impact on mental health of adolescents and the most frequently used coping strategies were positive reframing and active coping (Mathew et al, 2015). The correlation analysis gives clear indication that coping is significantly positively associated with psychological well-being. This is important in this age group as high psychological well-being reflects a better quality of life and it is important to achieve this by using various coping strategies. Since most of the research has been done mostly on professional population not young adult student population, this study fills an important gap. Indian college students need campus facilities of accessing counselors in order to ensure coping challenges do not escalate. The young adult population faces the grim reality of a life full of stress and tension, by establishing the relationship between coping and psychological well-being it is possible to provide interventions that aim to equip students to modify coping strategies and build up techniques of coping with stress. Overall, the research points to the importance of understanding the various ways college going students cope as well as the need to find ways to improve psychological well-being. If colleges can introduce mental health awareness programs as well as counselors and therapists to identify high risk cases, then it would greatly contribute to improving the state of mental well-being among this age group of population. This study affirms that the link between coping and psychological well-being is crucial and provides a basis for further investigations to provide better interventions.

### CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study were to assess the relationship between coping and psychological well-being among college students and the finding showed that there is a positive association between coping and psychological well-being, thereby indicating a tendency that when the individual experiences a higher level of coping, psychological well-being is also observed to increase. Among the other aims of the study was ascertaining if there are any gender differences and the results show no significant gender differences. Overall, this study highlights the importance of ensuring that college students develop and sustain positive coping strategies in order to experience high psychological well-being. It is important to equip college students to feel empowered in times of stress by employing suitable coping strategies.

#### *Limitations*

- The sample size was not large enough and randomly selected to generalize the findings.
- The length of the questionnaire was high due to which it was observed that the respondents were distracted.
- The correlational nature of this study prevented causal relationships to be deduced.

### Implications

The current study could prove useful in the field of psychology for both intervention as well as further research. Based on present findings, interventions for students can be offered in colleges to address ways of coping and how to maintain psychological well-being. Helping students to develop positivity and avoiding negative emotions will help them to work better on maintain their psychological well-being.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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