

## Gender on Emotional States, Social Support and Coping Style among Indian Adults

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Human life is divided into various stages, one of which is adulthood, characterized by productivity, responsibility, and the development of expertise. In recent decades, women have increasingly embraced diverse career opportunities and education, while men have taken on more household responsibilities. Traditionally, literature suggests that women often neglected their mental and physical health, leading to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The present study explores the relationship between social support and coping strategies in managing emotional states. A cross-sectional study was conducted with 67 adults aged 18-65 years, and the data were analyzed using Jamovi Statistical Software. The results indicated that women experience higher levels of anxiety and stress compared to men. Conversely, men tend to seek more emotional support and are more likely to avoid stressful situations. Furthermore, correlational analysis revealed that emotional states negatively correlate with social support dimensions (emotional, instrumental, and informational support) and task-oriented coping strategies. In contrast, emotion-oriented coping strategies showed a strong positive correlation with emotional states, suggesting that this coping style may be directly targeted to alleviate emotional distress. This study underscores the significance of understanding the complex relationship between social support and coping styles in managing emotional well-being and the impact of gender on them.

**Keywords:** social support, coping style, emotional states, adulthood, gender

Adulthood is a pivotal stage marked by increased productivity, responsibility, and the application of expertise. Among different developmental theories, Erikson's psychosocial development theory discusses that individuals pass through eight stages of psychosocial development throughout their lives. The 6th stage, Intimacy vs. Isolation, occurs in young adulthood (ages 18-40) and focuses on forming intimate, loving relationships, success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation. The 7th stage, Generativity vs. Stagnation, occurs in middle adulthood (ages 40-65) and centers on contributing to society and helping the next generation. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomplishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world

and feelings of stagnation (Orenstein GA., & Lewis L., 2022; Bishop, C. L., 2013; Erikson E.H., 1950/1985).

Women's mental health in India has been a subject of growing concern, particularly in light of evolving societal roles and increased stressors. Traditionally, Indian women faced considerable mental health challenges due to societal expectations, limited educational opportunities, and restricted access to healthcare. Literature also indicates that women were often expected to prioritize familial responsibilities over personal well-being, leading to chronic stress and higher incidences of depression and anxiety. In recent decades, women have increasingly embraced diverse career paths and educational opportunities, stepping beyond

traditional domestic roles but yet face same issues (Beutel et. al., 2017; Patel et al., 2008).

Social support plays a vital role in enhancing psychological well-being and reducing the impact of stress. It involves the emotional, instrumental, and informational assistance provided by social networks, including family, friends, and community. High levels of social support are associated with better mental health outcomes, as they provide individuals with the resources needed to cope with stress and adversity. Social support also fosters a sense of belonging and self-worth, which can buffer against depression and anxiety. The effectiveness of social support is influenced by the quality of relationships and the perceived availability of support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 2011). Social support encompasses various dimensions that contribute to well-being. Emotional support involves expressions of empathy, love, and care, which help individuals cope with stress. Instrumental support refers to tangible aid and services, such as financial assistance or help with daily tasks. Informational support provides advice, guidance, or information that aids in problem-solving. Appraisal support includes feedback and affirmation that helps individuals evaluate their situation and build self-confidence. These dimensions collectively enhance resilience and promote mental health, highlighting the multifaceted nature of social support in buffering against stress (House, 1981; Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Coping refers to the thought process and behavioral aspects that help individuals manage and get through stressful or difficult situations which could be internal or external influences. The three types of coping are problem-focused/task-oriented, emotional-oriented and avoidance-oriented (Chen, 2016; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Wu et al., 2020). Problem-focused coping is a proactive approach to alter stressful situations by addressing the root causes.

Emotion-focused coping seeks to reduce the emotional impact of stress through methods like self-blame or anger. Avoidance coping involves evading stressors through distraction or withdrawal. Coping is distinct from resilience; while the coping style focuses on managing stress, resilience reflects the ability to adapt to adversity. Lazarus's theory of stress and coping emphasizes the role of cognitive appraisal in how individuals experience and manage stress (Wu et al., 2020; Cooper & Quick, 2017; Bracaglia, 2017; Lazarus, 1966).

In the context of the post-COVID scenario, where mental health issues have surged globally, this study could be particularly timely. It sheds light on how individuals have been coping with increased stress, anxiety, and depression during the pandemic. The findings can help shape post-pandemic mental health styles and policies to address the ongoing mental health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated mental health issues worldwide, prompting individuals to seek effective coping styles and social support to manage their distress (Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). There has been significant improvements in women's access to education, employment, and healthcare, contributing to enhanced mental health awareness and support. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced new stressors, aggravating mental health issues among women. Studies show that the pandemic intensified preexisting gender disparities, with women experiencing increased domestic violence, economic instability, and caregiving burdens. Despite these challenges, there has been a positive shift towards recognizing and addressing women's mental health needs. Increased advocacy and mental health literacy have led to better support systems and more women seeking professional help. Comparative studies suggest that while mental health issues remain prevalent, the overall

awareness and resources available to women have improved significantly compared to previous decades (Ghosh, 2020; Kumar et al., 2020).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study holds considerable importance for understanding mental health dynamics, particularly among Indian adults, with a focus on gender differences in emotional states and coping strategies. Mental health issues in India, especially among women, have historically been influenced by cultural expectations and societal norms. While recent advancements in education and career opportunities for women have improved their status, mental health challenges persist due to the complex interplay of personal, social, and gender factors. This research is particularly significant as it explores the relationship between social support and coping mechanisms, both crucial in mitigating mental health challenges. Given the rising global awareness of mental health, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, the study provides timely insights into the strategies individuals use to manage stress, anxiety, and depression in a post-pandemic world. By delving into the psychosocial aspects of mental health, this study addresses the unique challenges faced by women in India, where traditional gender roles, alongside modern expectations, create additional stressors.

The present study on 'social support and coping styles in emotional states of Indian adults: exploring gender differences' has been supported by some previous literature that gives an understanding on how social support and coping styles relate to emotional states and especially how gender influences emotional states.

### **Social-Support and Emotional States**

Social support is crucial in mitigating the adverse effects of stress and enhancing overall well-being. It encompasses emotional, instrumental, informational support and appraisal support which collectively contribute to an individual's resilience against emotional states i.e. stress. Emotional support involves empathy, care, love, and trust, it helps individuals feel understood and less alone in difficult times; Instrumental support includes tangible assistance or practical help to reduce the burden of stress; Informational support pertains to advice guidance, or knowledge to help someone navigate a stressful situation; and Appraisal support includes affirmation, positive feedback and social comparison, helping individuals assess their condition and cope effectively. Research consistently shows that higher levels of social support are associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The buffering hypothesis posits that social support protects individuals from the detrimental effects of stress by providing necessary resources to cope with stressors (Acoba E.F., 2024; Yildirim, M., and Aziz, I. A., 2023; Alshammari, A. S., et. al. 2021; Bjorlykhaug, K. I., et.al. 2021; Liu, C., et.al., 2021; Bedaso, A., et. Al., 2021; Cobo-Rendón, R., et.al., 2020; Grey, I., et.al., 2020; Özmete, E., and Pak, M., 2020; Tengku Mohd, T.A. M., et.al., 2019; Bender, M., et.al., 2019; Watson, R. J., et.al., 2019; Wang, J., et.al., 2018; Garipey, G., et.al., 2016; Thoits, 2011; Chu, P. S., et.al., 2010; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981).

### **Coping Style and Emotional States**

Coping *styles* are cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage stress. Coping *Styles* are categorized into task-oriented, emotional-oriented and avoidance strategies. Task-oriented coping involves tackling the task causing stress; Emotional focused coping entails managing emotions related to the

stressor, and Avoidance coping includes evading the stressor

Studies have shown that task-focused coping is generally more effective in reducing stress and improving psychological outcomes compared to emotional-focused and avoidance coping. However, the effectiveness of coping styles can vary based on the context and individual differences (Nair, A., et.al. 2024; Beckman, L., et. al. 2023; Rossi, C., et.al., 2022; Feyisa, B.R., et.al., 2022; Imran, S., et.al., 2020; Imran S, et.al. 2020; Olabisi, O.I., et.al. 2020; Matud, M. P., 2004; Compas B. E., et. al., 2001).

### **Gender Differences in Mental Health**

Gender differences in mental health have been widely documented. Women are more likely to experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to men. These differences can be attributed to various factors, including biological, social, and psychological influences. Women often face unique stressors such as gender discrimination, balancing work and family responsibilities, and societal expectations. Moreover, gender differences in coping styles have been observed. Women are more likely to use emotional-focused coping, while men are more inclined towards task-focused coping. These differences in coping styles can influence the effectiveness of managing stress and emotional well-being (Hwang, S., et al., 2023; Hassan, N.A., et.al. 2023; Yoon, Y., et.al., 2023; Dotsikas, K., et.al. 2023; Kuehner, 2017; Afifi, M. 2007; Matud, M.P., 2004; NolenHoeksema, S., 2001).

Thus, the emotional states of any individual are influenced by their coping styles and the social support that they get from their surroundings. An individual's mental wellness is established with stable emotional states and it is evidenced that it is succeeded by proper emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal support they receive and the styles they use

in handling tasks, and emotions and sometimes avoiding difficult situations also are quite important. Moreover, it is also evidenced that gender also influences the emotional states along with the different types of social support they get and the different ways they use coping styles are crucial. Hence, this study *aims* to explore the interplay between social support and coping styles in influencing emotional states among Indian adults, with a focus on gender differences.

### **Objectives**

- To explore gender differences in emotional states, social support, and coping styles.
- To find the relationship between emotional states with social support and coping style.

### **Hypotheses**

- Social support and coping styles have a significant relationship between emotional states.
- Gender has a significant effect on emotional states, social support and coping styles.

### **Method**

#### **Research design**

A cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 67 adults aged between 18-65 years from India. The sample included both men and women to explore gender differences in social support, coping strategies, and emotional states.

#### **Measures**

*Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)* have three sets of self-reported measures, each with seven items, which are used to measure emotional states, such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Each dimension has 7 items each and responded in 5-point Likert scale.

*Coping Inventory for Stressful Situations (CISS-21)* has 21 self-reported items measuring coping strategies, under three dimensions task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance coping with each 7 items in them responded in a 5-point Likert Scale.

*Brief Social Support Scale (BSSS)* was used to assess social support with altered four items based on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and Lazarus and Folkman's Stress and Coping Theory. It includes one item in each dimension of emotional, instrumental, informational support, and appraisal, for the sake of this project. The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.711$ ).

### Results

Table 1. shows the means, standard deviations, t-values and significant values of the participants with respect to their gender in Emotional States and Social Support.

Variable	Gender	N	M	SD	t	Sig.
SS-E	Male	34	3.91	1.08	2.772**	0.007
	Female	33	3.09	1.33		
Depression	Male	34	4	3.89	-2.642**	0.010
	Female	33	6.55	3.99		
Anxiety	Male	34	4.59	3.52	-2.670**	0.010
	Female	33	7	3.87		
	Female	33	22.39	6.3		
Stress	Male	34	21.91	4.63	2.717**	0.008
	Female	33	18.82	4.69		

Note: \*\* - significant at 0.01 level;

\*- significant at 0.05 level. SS: Social Support; E: Emotional

The analysis revealed significant gender differences in anxiety and stress levels. Women reported higher levels of anxiety ( $t=2.642$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and stress ( $t=2.670$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) compared to men. Conversely, men reported higher levels of emotional support ( $t=2.772$ ,

$p=0.01$ ) and were more likely to use avoidance coping styles ( $t=2.717$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) than women.

Table 2. shows the correlation between emotional states and dimensions of social support and coping strategies.

Variable	SS-E	SS-Ins	SS-Inf	CS-TO	CS-EO
Depression			-0.311**	-0.262*	0.634***
Anxiety	-0.335**	-0.255*			0.731***
Stress	-0.457***	-0.269*		-0.256*	0.644***

Note: \*\*\* - significant at 0.001 level;

\*\* - significant at 0.01 level; \*- significant at 0.05 level. SS: Social Support; E: Emotional; Ins: Instrumental; Inf: Informational; A: Appraisal; CS: Coping strategies; TO: Task Oriented; EO: Emotional Oriented

The correlational analysis indicated that all the dimensions of emotional states are negatively correlated with the dimensions of social support, i.e. depression is negatively correlated with informational support ( $r=-0.311$ ,  $p=0.01$ ); anxiety is negatively correlated with emotional support and instrumental support with the scores ( $r=-0.335$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) and ( $r=-0.255$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) respectively; likewise, stress is negatively correlated with emotional support and instrumental support with the scores ( $r=-0.457$ ,  $p=0.001$ ) and ( $r=-0.269$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) respectively. This indicates that intervening and increased level of social support is associated with the lower level of emotional distress.

The results also show that the dimensions depression ( $r=-0.262$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) and stress ( $r=-0.256$ ,  $p=0.05$ ) are negatively correlated with task-oriented coping style. Whereas, emotion-focused coping style has a strong positive correlates with all the three dimensions of emotional states at  $p=0.001$  level with the scores depression ( $r=0.634$ ), anxiety ( $r=0.731$ ) and stress ( $r=0.644$ ) indicating that reliance on emotional focused

coping is associated with higher levels of emotional distress. This finding underscores the potential for intervening in emotional focused coping to reduce emotional distress. Whereas, the analysis doesn't show any relationship between appraisal support or avoidance coping styles with the emotional states, i.e. depression, anxiety or stress.

### **Discussion**

Gender differences in emotional states, social support, and coping styles have long been subjects of psychological inquiry. Traditional studies have often emphasized that women, due to societal pressures and expectations, are more prone to neglect their mental health, resulting in higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to men. However, evolving research reveals that while women exhibit greater emotional vulnerability, the dynamics of social support and coping strategies differ significantly between genders. This discussion delves into these disparities, drawing from recent findings that challenge some conventional assumptions. By exploring how men and women differ in their use of social support and coping mechanisms, the study highlights the need for gender-sensitive mental health practices, acknowledging that cultural and contextual factors play a crucial role in shaping these dynamics.

### **Gender Differences in Emotional States, Social Support and Coping Styles:**

Based on the traditional studies, it's often seen that women are prone to neglect their mental health leading to higher issues of anxiety and depression. The findings of this study align with existing literature, highlighting that women experience higher levels of anxiety and stress compared to men. The higher emotional support reported by men contradicts some previous research, suggesting that social support dynamics may vary across different cultural contexts. Men's greater use of avoidance coping styles aligns

with traditional gender roles, where men may prefer to avoid dealing with stressors directly. Understanding these disparities is very important for developing gender-sensitive mental health interventions (Dotsikas, K., et.al., 2023; Kuehner, 2017; Matud, 2004).

### **Impact of Social Support and Coping Strategies:**

The present study underscores the importance of social support in managing emotional distress, it has been associated inversely with emotional states. The findings that men avail more emotional support and tend to avoid stressful situations more than women highlight the need for tailored social support systems that cater to the specific needs of both genders. Enhancing social support networks could be a key strategy in mitigating stress and improving mental health outcomes. Social support could be obtained from various sources i.e. family, peers or even pets. It's understood by the literature that the perceived support acts more effectively than that of received support, which can be highly helpful in stressful or even non-stressful situations. It is seen that the relationship of emotional support in the emotional states is high and it helps individuals to cope up in distress situations. Secondly, social support includes instrumental support that helps individuals in guiding their stressors by providing sufficient resources and practical assistance. Thirdly, the informational support that gives advice or feedback helps individuals to claim their opportunity to meet their needs and helps them successfully have a stable and enhanced emotional state would decrease the negative emotional consequences (Acoba, E.F., 2024; Green et al., 2024; Yildirim and Aziz, 2023; Ghafari et al., 2021; Bedaso et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Cobo-Rendón et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020; Ozmete and Pak, 2020; Grey et al., 2020; Alshehri et al., 2020; Bender et al., 2019; Watson et al., 2019; Mohd et al., 2019; Wang

et al., 2018; Garipey et al., 2016; Chu et al., 2010; Gulactý, 2010).

The study's exploration of coping styles reveals that task-oriented coping styles correlate negatively with emotional distress, while emotion-oriented coping styles correlate positively. This indicates that promoting task-oriented coping mechanisms could be beneficial in reducing emotional distress. The identification of effective coping styles can inform mental health professionals and policymakers in designing interventions that foster resilience and better mental health outcomes (Imran S., 2022; Feyisa, B.R., 2022).

### **Implications for Mental Health Interventions**

The negative correlation between social support and emotional states emphasizes the importance of fostering robust support systems to mitigate emotional distress. Interventions aimed at enhancing social support, particularly emotional, instrumental, and informational support, could be beneficial in reducing anxiety, stress, and depression. The positive correlation between emotion-oriented coping and emotional distress suggests that styles to shift from emotion focused to more adaptive coping strategies, such as task-oriented coping, could be effective in managing emotional states. Cognitive Behavioral interventions that focus on developing problem-solving skills and reducing reliance on emotion focused coping may be particularly useful.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. The sample size was relatively small, and the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Future research could consider longitudinal studies with larger, more diverse samples to validate and extend these findings.

Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in shaping social support dynamics and coping strategies. Future studies should explore the cultural context of social support and coping mechanisms in greater detail to develop culturally sensitive interventions.

### **Conclusion**

This study underscores the importance of understanding the nuanced roles of social support and coping styles in influencing emotional states among Indian adults. The findings highlight significant gender differences in anxiety, stress, and coping strategies. Effective mental health interventions should consider promoting social support and adaptive coping styles while recognizing the potential complexities of social support dynamics. A comprehensive approach that includes enhancing social support systems and developing adaptive coping skills can play a crucial role in managing mental health challenges.

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