



Research Paper

## The Relationship of Coping Strategies and Subjective Well-Being among Empty Nest Elderly

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**ABSTRACT:** The main aim of the study was to assess the subjective well-being and coping strategies used by the empty-nest elderly and to evaluate the association between the coping strategy and subjective well-being. A sample of 184 empty-nest elderly (76 males and 108 females) were selected and Subjective Well-Being Inventory and Brief-COPE were administered. The results showed that there is no significant difference in the subjective well-being of empty-nest elderly male and female. The coping strategy most used by the empty-nest elderly males are behavioral disengagement venting and planning whereas empty-nest elderly females use emotional support, self-distraction and religion for coping. Also, the use of emotional support, positive reframing, planning and acceptance significantly positively predict the subjective well-being in empty-nest elders. The negative predictors of subjective well-being are self-distraction, venting, religion and self-blame. For empty-nest elders, the intervention can focus on the coping strategies which can help in increasing the level of subjective well-being in them.

**KEYWORDS:** Empty-nest Elderly, Coping Strategy, Subjective Well-Being

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Ageing does not just affect the elderly (defined as 60 years or more); it affects everyone in one society in one way or the other. Globally, the elderly population constitutes about 12 percent of the total population of 7.3 billion. The number of elderlies will double by 2050, reaching 2 billion and accounting for 22 percent of the global population, outnumbering those under the age of 15 for the first time in history. [1].

In India too, the size and percentage of elderly population have been increasing in recent years and this trend is likely to continue in the coming decades. The elderly population has increased from 77 million in 2001 to 104 million in 2011. By 2050, the elderly population is likely to increase three times to reach around 300 million, accounting for 20 percent of the total population of the country. The relatively young India of today will turn into a rapidly greying society in the coming decades. In the present study, the focus is to identify the coping strategies of the empty nest elderly. The term “empty nest” refers to the physical and psychological change in the family when a child leaves home or goes away to college. For about 18 years or more, parents have invested themselves in the emotionally consuming process of raising a family—and suddenly one day the children leave home. As the nest empties, a chapter of parenting draws to a close, often accompanied by ambivalent feelings from both children and parents. The empty space that opens up in parents’ lives can be both exciting and frightening. These situations create feelings of loneliness among empty nest elderly. The difference in social support level cause difference in loneliness and subjective well-being, also social support is found to be significantly correlated with loneliness and subjective well-being. [2]. Coping has been defined in the literature as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” [3]. In the past, the dominant conceptual model in research focused on coping effectiveness as manifest in the reduction of distress. However, coping may have other functions. For example, proactive coping is conceptualized more broadly as an approach to life in which an individual’s efforts are directed towards goal management where demands and different situations are seen more as challenges rather than stressors [4].

A study aimed to determine predictors of subjective well-being revealed that the significant predictive variables for the elderlies' subjective wellbeing include age, health status, perceived stress, community participation, family income, and neighbourhood safety. [5]. Another [6].

## **II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

The essential themes of Indian cultural life are centred on family. The joint family, in particular, was highly valued, ideally consisting of several generations residing, working, eating, and worshiping together. Even in rapidly modernizing India, the traditional joint household, though not as much in practice, has affected the importance of family, as close kinship remains, for most Indians, the primary social force of life. This notion of kinship ties for support through life is thus still central to everyday life in India.

At every stage of life, it is needed that people make adjustment according to the changing pace of time and those who don't suffer stress. Empty-Nest is said to be the transitional stage where the person has to shift from the role of parenting and rearing their children. They suffer physical wear and tear and sometimes may find themselves alone or with less support in this situation. A part of this population may become physically and psychologically stressed while others may turn to certain hobbies or practices (though knowingly or unknowingly) that we are taking as coping strategies. These coping strategies of empty-nest elderly can help them to deal with stressors in their life. There are very few studies done on coping style of elderly and its effect on subjective wellbeing. Thus, this study would identify the coping strategies of empty nest elderly and put forward the difference of subjective wellbeing of people who are using these coping strategies and who are still suffering their empty-nest condition. Also, the efficacy of acceptance commitment therapy with the elderly population will be identified and this will provide a measure for increasing the subjective wellbeing of empty-nest elderly. So, the roots of the society, the elderly could be benefitted by acquiring these strategies.

## **III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Population ageing is an inevitable and irreversible demographic reality associated with improvements in health and medical care, as well as with decline in fertility. While increasing longevity is a matter to celebrate, various have found multiple morbidities and disabilities linked to the advancement of age. A study done on empty nesters in China argued that inadequate social service and incapability to access proper home care leads to their poor subjective well-being. This study also found that subjective wellbeing of female empty nesters was significantly low than male empty nesters. [6]. The well-being of older persons can also greatly depend on whom they live with, particularly in developing countries where the elderly has little recourse to former welfare systems. Living arrangements among the elderly was not an issue in India till a few decades ago because their families were expected to take care of them. But with the reduction in fertility and increased life expectancy at old ages, conventional living arrangements have been undergoing a transformation. With declining informal social support systems, older persons who live alone are likely to be more vulnerable than those who live with the family, especially in the case of elderly women. While majority of the elderly are still living with their children in India, about one –fifth either live alone or only with the spouse and hence have to manage their material and physical needs on their own. The proportion of older persons living alone without spouse (solo living) has increased over time 2.4 percent in 1992/93 to 5 percent in 2004/05. [7]. The proportion of elderly who live alone varied from 13.7 percent in Tamil Nadu to 1.7 percent in Jammu and Kashmir in 2005/06. Similarly, survey data from BKPAI collected in 2011 also showed that the proportion of the elderly living alone was the highest in Tamil Nadu (26 percent). Across seven states included in the survey, a higher percentage of elderly women live alone compared to men. As expected, more elderly who have lost their spouses live alone. [8]. A study done on empty nesters in China found that the subjective well-being of these people was low. And there are also gender differences in the level of their SWB. Specifically, negative life events have greater impact on the SWB of elderly males, who are more likely to worry about unfortunate or unpleasant events in daily life. In contrast, females are more affected by positive life events and are more concerned whether their activities are boring or monotonous. It appears that different attitudes to life affected the psychological conditions of the elderly. [6]. In empty nesters, the feeling of loneliness is not uncommon. Loneliness and social networks both independently affect mood and wellbeing in the elderly, underlying a very significant proportion of depressed mood. [9]. It is also found that in empty nest elderly generally exist the different degree of depression, self-care ability, and high incidence of chronic diseases. [10]. In many studies, it was found that mental health also gets affected by this empty nest situation. A cross-sectional study done on empty-nesters found that coping style partially mediate the relationship between the personality and mental health. Consequently, to improve the mental health of the empty-nest elderly, coping style should be the focus. [11]. Another descriptive study also concluded a negative correlation between psychological problems and coping strategies. The results of this study showed that 60% majority of elderly people have moderate level of psychological problems and 43% of elderly were had at fair level of coping strategies. [12].

#### IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the coping strategies used by Empty-Nest elderly.
2. To assess the subjective wellbeing of Empty-Nest elderly.
3. To examine the relationship among coping strategies and subjective well-being in Empty-Nest elderly.

#### V. HYPOTHESES

1. There is a significant difference in coping strategies used by Empty-Nest elderly male and female.
2. There is a significant difference in subjective wellbeing among Empty-Nest elderly male and female.
3. There is a significant relationship of coping strategies and subjective wellbeing among Empty-Nest elderly male and female.

#### VI. METHODOLOGY

The present study used descriptive research design and convenience sampling was used to collect the data from elderly people willing to take part in the research process. Demographic details were taken and measures of coping and subjective wellbeing was administered on 184 empty-nest elders in which 76 were males and 108 were females. People having age equal to or more than 55 years were approached. Empty nest condition was measured by the following questions: (1) “How many people are there in your house living together with you in the past one year?” If the answer was not zero, then they were asked; (2) “Who are they, spouse, children, or others?” Elders who lived alone or with spouse only were considered as empty nest elders.

Tools used: To assess the coping strategies used by the participants Brief COPE by C. S. Carvar in 1997 was used. [13] This scale has 28 items that has 14 subscales having 2-items each for assessing 14 coping methods. The Cronbach’s alpha was found to be 0.77 for the present study.

The subjective well-being of the participants was assessed by using Subjective Wellbeing Inventory by Dr. H. Sell and Dr. R. Nagpal in 1992 [14] It is a 40-item questionnaire having 11 subscales. The negative items were reverse coded. The total score on this scale gives us the measure of overall subjective well-being of a person. The Cronbach’s alpha value for this study was 0.92.

Statistical Analysis: For the analysis of the data, both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was performed by using SPSS version 26. To determine the coping strategy most used in the sample, the median scores were calculated for each subscale and then the participants scoring higher scores than the median were designated as high utilizers of that strategy. Mean difference analysis was done to find out the difference in subjective well-being in males and females. The association between coping strategy used and subjective well-being was found by doing the linear regression analysis.

#### VII. RESULTS

The mean age of the sample was 67 years (males- 68 years and females- 66 years). It was found that behavioral disengagement (57.9%), venting (57.9%), planning (50%), humor (44.7%) and denial (42.1%) were the strategies most used by empty-nest elderly males. And, use of emotional support (59.3%), self-distraction (51.9%), religion (51.9%), self-blame (48.1%) and use of instrumental support (46.3%) were the strategies which were used mostly by the empty-nest elderly females as indicated in Figure 1.

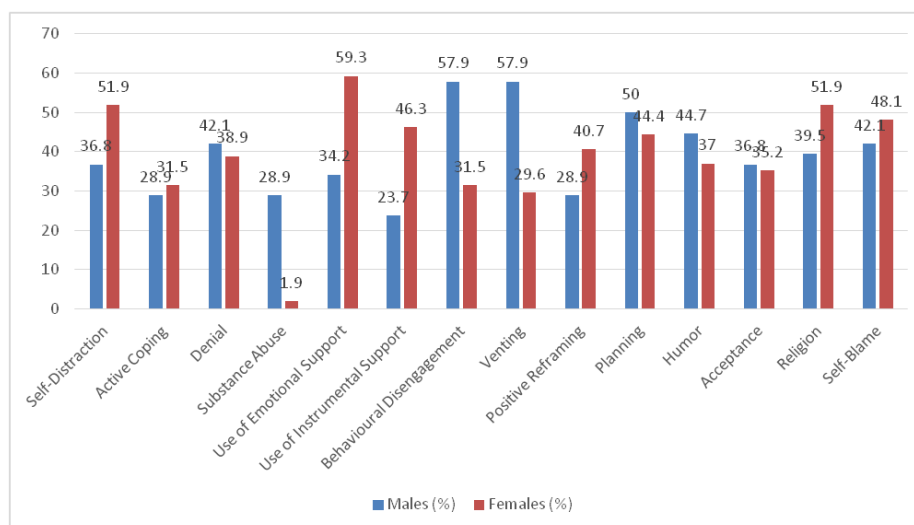


Figure 1 Distribution of coping strategies used by males and females. The figure displays the proportion of participants with a score greater than the median score for each strategy.

Also there has been a significant difference found in the utilization of substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental, behavioral disengagement and venting as coping strategy among empty-nest elderly males and females as shown in Table 1.

Coping Strategies	Males (%)	Females (%)	Chi-square test	Sig. value
Self-Distraction	36.8	51.9	4.05	0.04*
Active Coping	28.9	31.5	0.14	0.71
Denial	42.1	38.9	0.19	0.66
Substance Abuse	28.9	1.9	28.87	0.003*
Use of Emotional Support	34.2	59.3	11.2	0.001*
Use of Instrumental Support	23.7	46.3	9.79	0.002*
Behavioural Disengagement	57.9	31.5	12.74	0.001*
Venting	57.9	29.6	14.7	0.002*
Positive Reframing	28.9	40.7	2.69	0.101
Planning	50	44.4	0.55	0.46
Humor	44.7	37	1.1	0.29
Acceptance	36.8	35.2	0.05	0.82
Religion	39.5	51.9	2.75	0.098
Self-Blame	42.1	48.1	0.66	0.42

**Table 1** Percentage distribution of coping strategies used by males and females and the value of Chi square test and significance level. \*Significant at (p<0.05).

Sex	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
Male	94.55	76	13.473
Female	95.78	108	13.210
Total	95.27	184	13.296

**Table 2** Mean value of subjective well-being

The total mean of subjective well-being was found to be 95.3 in which the average of the level of subjective well-being in males and females were 94.5 and 95.8 respectively as shown in Table 2. There was no significant difference (u=3904.0, p=0.57) found in the subjective well-being of male and female empty-nest elders.

The association of coping strategies was found to be significantly correlated with subjective well-being. Using multiple regression analysis, a significant relationship between subjective well-being and coping strategies has been found. R-square value of 0.602 which suggest 60% of variance in subjective well-being as indicated in Table 3. Self-distraction, venting, humor, religion and self-blame were found to be significantly negatively correlated with and subjective well-being. Use of emotional support, positive reframing, planning and acceptance were found to be significantly positively correlated with subjective well-being.

Variables	b	t	Significance
(Constant)	78.867	13.252	0.000*
Self-Distraction	-1.375	-2.808	0.006*
Active Coping	0.477	0.779	0.437
Denial	-0.348	-0.653	0.515
Substance Abuse	-0.136	-0.158	0.875
Use of Emotional Support	1.682	3.346	0.001*
Use of Instrumental Support	0.607	1.18	0.24
Behavioural Disengagement	-0.085	-0.16	0.873
Venting	-2.105	-4.607	0.000*

Positive Reframing	2.614	4.798	0.000*
Planning	1.382	2.589	0.01*
Humor	-0.257	-0.453	0.651
Acceptance	1.134	2.177	0.031*
Religion	-1.139	-2.45	0.015*
Self-Blame	-0.956	-1.996	0.048*

**Table 3** Multiple Regression Analysis for Coping strategies predicting Subjective Well-being.  $R^2 = 0.60$ .  
\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

## VIII. DISCUSSION

Empty-nest condition brings a different kind of challenge in the life of older adults. And, to cope with this situation they use different kinds of coping strategies. In the present study, results showed that empty-nest elderly males and females significantly differ in using substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental, behavioral disengagement and venting as coping strategy. Among these coping strategies males showed higher utilization of substance abuse, behavioral disengagement and venting in comparison to females. Whereas, females showed higher utilization of emotional and instrumental support. These findings are supported by a previous study which found that females rely more on the social support for coping than males [15]. Another study focused on studying the gender differences in stress and coping styles found that females tend to use emotional and avoidance coping styles and while men mostly rely on rational and detachment coping styles to cope with their stress [16]. In the present sample also female empty nest elders showed higher utilization of use of emotional support (59.3%), self-distraction (51.9%), religion (51.9%), self-blame (48.1%) and use of instrumental support (46.3%) than males. While most male empty-nest elders showed higher utilization of behavioral disengagement (57.9%), venting (57.9%), planning (50%), humor (44.7%) and denial (42.1%).

The mean score of subjective well-being of normal adult Indian sample was found to be 90.87 with a standard deviation of 9.2. For the present sample, the mean score of subjective well-being was found to be 95.3 (SD=13.29) in which the average of the level of subjective well-being in males and females were 94.5 (SD=13.47) and 95.8 (SD=13.21) respectively. And, no significant difference was found in the subjective well-being of empty-nest elderly males and females. Many previous studies supported this result that there is no significant difference in the subjective well-being among people based on gender. And, it was found that males and females perceive and evaluate their lives in a similar way [17]. A meta-analytical study also found that gender is not a major determinant of subjective wellbeing [18]. Conversely, a study done on rural elderly people of China living independently found that the level of subjective well-being was significantly lower in females than males. [19].

In the present study the coping strategies are found to be a good predictor of subjective well-being. By the value of R-square being 0.602, 60% of variance in subjective well-being can be predicted by the coping strategies. A study done on elderly Chinese empty-nesters showed that the coping style affects the mental health of empty-nest elderly and also partially mediate the relationship between the personality and mental health of the empty-nest elderly [11].

## IX. CONCLUSION

Empty-nest elderly uses different styles of coping strategies for dealing with everyday stressors in their life. The style of coping strategy affects the level of subjective wellbeing in them. Thus, this study will help us to get following outcome: This study showed that there is no significant difference in the level of subjective well-being on the basis of gender. But the coping strategies used by the two genders i.e., male and female have significant differences. Also, there is a significant association between the coping strategies and subjective well-being in the empty-nest elderly population. This knowledge can help us to develop a better intervention plan for them which target on the learning of better adapting coping strategies.

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