

## A Comparative Study of Coping Strategies Among Empty Nest Elderly Males And Females

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### **Abstract**

*The main aim of the study was to assess the coping strategies used by the empty-nest elderly and to compare them among empty-nest elderly males and females. A sample of 184 empty-nest elderly (76 males and 108 females) were selected and Brief-COPE was administered. The results showed that the coping strategy most used by the empty-nest elderly males is behavioral disengagement venting and planning whereas empty-nest elderly females use emotional support, self-distraction and religion for coping. Also, a significant difference has been found between males and females in the utilization of self-distraction, substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental, behavioral disengagement, venting and religion as coping strategies in empty-nest elders.*

**Keywords:** *Empty-nest Elderly, Coping Strategy, Gender*

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## **Introduction**

Population aging is an inevitable and irreversible demographic reality associated with improvements in health and medical care, as well as with a decline in fertility. While increasing longevity is a matter to celebrate, various have found multiple morbidities and disabilities linked to the advancement of age. 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. Aging 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. (United Nations Population Fund, 2017).

In India too, the size and percentage of the 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. It has been estimated that by 2050, the elderly population is likely to increase three times to reach around 300 million, which will be accounting for 20 percent of the total population of the country (Arora, 2019). 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.

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 transforming. 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 a 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 a spouse (solo living) has increased over time 2.4 percent in 1992/93 to 5 percent in 2004/05. (Sathyanarayan, Kumar, & James, 2012). 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. (The United Nations Population Fund, 2011).

This situation of an empty nest is accompanied by ambivalent feelings in both parents and children. The space that opens up in parents' lives can be both exciting and frightening. These situations create feelings of loneliness among the empty-nest elderly. Coping has been defined in the literature as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). 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 (Greenglass, Finkenbaum, & Eaton, 2006). 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. (Golden & Conroy, 2009). It was also found that in empty nest elderly generally exist the different degree of depression, self-care ability, and high incidence of chronic diseases. (Cao, Gao, & Zhang, 2014). 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 mediates the relationship between personality and mental health. Consequently, to improve the mental health of the empty-nest elderly, coping style should be the focus. (Su, Cao, Zhou, Wang, & Xing, 2018). 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 a moderate level of psychological problems and 43% of the elderly were had a fair level of coping strategies. (Nishanthi & Priya, 2017).

### **Rationale of the Study**

The essential themes of Indian cultural life are centered on family. The joint family, in particular, was highly valued, ideally consisting of several generations residing, working, eating, and worshipping 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 adjustments 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 the coping style of the elderly and the comparison of coping strategies between empty-nest elderly males and females. Thus, this study would identify the coping strategies of empty-nest elderly and put forward the difference of coping strategies used by males and females who are suffering their empty-nest condition.

### **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 a measure of coping was administered on 184 empty-nest elders in which 76 were males and 108 were females. People having an 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.

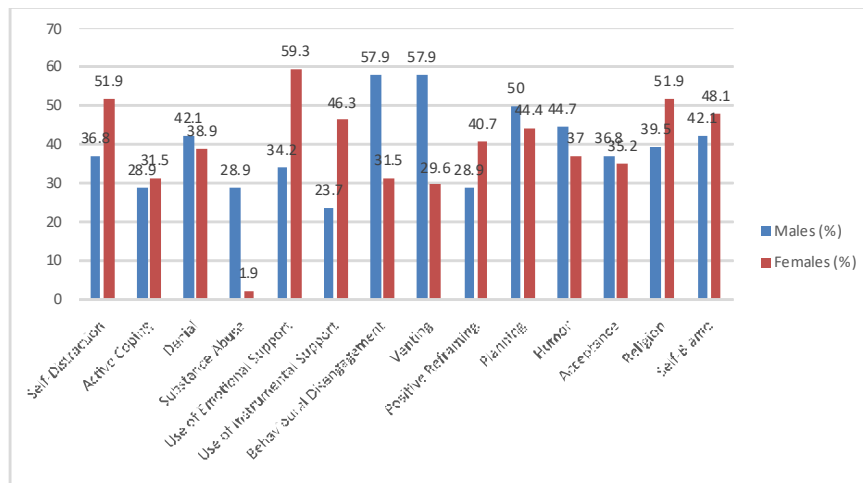
Tools used: To assess the coping strategies used by the participant's Brief COPE by C. S. Carver in 1997 was used. (Carver, 1997) This scale has 28 items that have 14 subscales having 2-items each for assessing 14 coping methods. The 14 coping strategies which are measured in this scale are self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion and self-blame. Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.77 for the present study.

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 the utilization of coping strategies among empty-nest elderly males and females.

**Results**

The mean age of the sample was 67 years (males-68 years and females-66years). 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 self-distraction, substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental, behavioral disengagement, venting and religion as coping strategy among empty-nest elderly males and females as shown in Table 1.

<b>Coping Strategies</b>	<b>Males (%)</b>	<b>Females (%)</b>	<b>t-test</b>	<b>Sig. value</b>
Self-Distracton	36.8	51.9	-2.76	0.007*
Active Coping	28.9	31.5	0.76	0.449
Denial	42.1	38.9	0.43	0.67
Substance Abuse	28.9	1.9	4.54	0.001*
Use of Emotional Support	34.2	59.3	-2.51	0.013*
Use of Instrumental Support	23.7	46.3	-2.27	0.025*
Behavioral Disengagement	57.9	31.5	2.19	0.030*
Venting	57.9	29.6	4.76	0.001*
Positive Reframing	28.9	40.7	-1.40	0.165
Planning	50	44.4	0.99	0.322
Humor	44.7	37	0.89	0.371
Acceptance	36.8	35.2	0.18	0.862
Religion	39.5	51.9	-3.61	0.001*
Self-Blame	42.1	48.1	-0.49	0.625

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

### **Discussion**

The 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 self-distracton, substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting and religion as coping strategies. 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 self-distracton, emotional support, instrumental support and religion as a coping strategy. These findings are supported by a previous study which found that females rely more on social support for coping than males (Pelissier & Jones, 2006). 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 (Matud, 2004). This same kind of gender differences in the utilization of coping strategies has not only been found in older adults but also young children and adolescents as well. In one such study, the results showed that girls tend to use emotional support and problem-solving more as their coping strategy whereas boys tend to use avoidant coping more (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007). From this, it can be concluded that gender differences in coping exist from an

early age in people. 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 (463%) 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 results of the present study also showed a significant difference in the use of self-distraction substance use, emotional support, instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting and religion among empty-nest elderly males and females. It has been found in various researches that women use social support more likely than men (Ptacek, Smith, & Dodge, 1994). As the results of the study showed no significant difference in the use of problem-solving as a coping strategy among different genders, this is inconsistency with the results found in a study done by Melendez et al. (2012) aimed to study the gender differences in coping strategies throughout the life span (Melendez, Mayordomo, Soncho, & Tomas, 2012). This suggests that though female empty-nest elders see more social support than males no difference is present in their problem-solving behavior. A meta-analytic study supports this idea and also contradicts the notion of any kind of existence of gender difference in coping styles of people (Porter & Stone, 1995).

### **Conclusion**

Empty-nest elderly uses different styles of coping strategies for dealing with everyday stressors in their life. This study showed that there is a significant difference in the coping strategies used by the two genders i.e., male and female. And thus, based on that we can use a different approach in dealing with different genders of the empty-nest elderly population while providing them mental health care services.

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