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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Emotional Struggles and Coping Strategies Employed by University Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: The research aims to explore and uncover the emotional struggles and various coping strategies employed by students during university life. The study has been undertaken on challenges encountered by students in their emotional life and the strategies they adopt to cope with those emotional struggles among undergraduate students in various universities in Peshawar. The findings revealed that a majority of students experienced multiple emotional challenges that affected both their academic performance and personal lives. This is also a reality that there are no guidance and psychological services provided to students individually, and it is not possible for students to visit psychological clinics. In this scenario, students tackle their own emotions through various strategies that they employ while facing emotional struggles. These students then find ways on their own to help themselves regulate their emotions. The study findings recommend the development of institutional resources and counseling services within universities to support students' well-being and to cope with their emotional struggles.

Keywords: Emotions, Emotional Intelligence, Coping Strategies, Undergraduate Students, Emotional Regulation, Emotional Struggles

Introduction

The current study is a small effort to find out the answers to important questions related to emotional regulation, such as what challenges do students face in achieving emotional self-regulation, and then how they cope with those emotional struggles. The researcher has discovered gaps in the studies after a detailed and in-depth reading of the many articles on emotional regulation by students, and specifically by university students, but there were not many studies on coping with emotional issues faced by students. The study seeks to highlight and uncover the coping strategies used by students directly or indirectly to regulate their emotional struggles in university life. The study has been undertaken on struggles faced by university students and specifically on the use of coping strategies to regulate the emotions of undergraduate students in various universities of Peshawar. All of the students enrolled in Peshawar's numerous universities made up the population. According to the current study's findings, the majority of students experienced a number of emotional issues related to both their personal and academic lives. This is also a reality that there are no guidance and psychological services provided to every student individually, and it is very difficult for students to visit psychological clinics as well. In this scenario, students tackle their own emotions through various strategies that they employ while facing emotional struggles.

Nowadays, much attention has been given to psychological perspectives in the field of education. The study of emotional processes has drawn particular attention from researchers, and the emotional factors have

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become important (D'Mello, 2013; Klimstra et al., 2018). This is why the current study has concentrated on the emotional regulation of university students and coping strategies used by them in various ways.

The purpose of this study was to look into and examine the challenges students encounter in developing emotional self-regulation and the coping strategies employed by them in one or other ways. The findings showed that the early-level students' ability to control their emotions differed greatly from that of the senior-semester pupils. These students then find resources and sources on their own to cope with the emotional struggles and then regulate their emotions. These results lead to the recommendation that colleges provide resources, facilities, and opportunities for counseling programs so that students can effectively manage their emotions.

Attachment style, emotional regulation, and assertiveness were explored in a study by Plantade in relation to the well-being of emerging adults. The total sample of the study was 360 French adults, and their mean age was 21.3 years. The results of the study showed that one's own judgment is very important for the emotional experience of an individual (Plantade, 2023).

Tangco-Siason (2025) conducted a study on the coping behaviors of college students in Iloilo, Philippines. The total sample was 2,236 first-generation college students, and the main focus of the study was coping and management of academic, emotional, and socioeconomic stressors of college students. The mixed methods design was used, and the data were gathered through both quantitative and qualitative designs. The most frequently appearing strategies were spiritual support, relaxation, and cognitive reappraisal. The findings of the qualitative data revealed that there were six major themes, and one of them was coping through spirituality, cognitive and Emotional Self-Regulation, and use of Social Support. The major theme of spirituality was prominent among college students due to their strong dependence on inner strength and cultural values.

González-González et al. (2025) stated that the tough and complex life of university students affects them in numerous ways, and their emotional well-being and academic performance are at the top of the list. The focus of the study was on coping and effective support strategies employed by university students. The results revealed that female students mostly used emotional support and religion as coping strategies, while male students relied on the use of substances. The study revealed the targeted interventions that promote adaptive coping and enhance student well-being in university years.

Rojas-Ruiz et al. (2024) stated that European women are the ones who use active strategies the most, and men are the ones who use fewer coping strategies, and use both emotional expression and social support to resolve conflicts.

This is emphasized by various researchers that the emotional health of students is very important for showing good academic performance, and due to unsuccessful efforts in academic performance, mental health problems arise at the global level (Twenge, 2010). There are many other factors related to personality that can influence individuals to face emotional problems like anxiety, aggression, and depression (Smith, 2019).

Rodgers and Tennison (2009) reported in a study that the university years are the most challenging and demanding for a university student in the context of academic excellence. But on the other side of academic grounds, they have to deal with a lot of pressures and obstacles that present a range of emotional, physical, and social struggles. These variations in the social and emotional life of university students then lead them to face more mental issues (Benton et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2007; Stanley & Manthorpe, 2001). Several substantial studies have also shown that due to various emotional struggles faced by university students, there is an increase in mental health problems as well (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Emotional Regulation

People employ this process to control their own emotions, and during this process, they manage everything related to their emotional experience, like when those emotions happened, how they are experiencing those emotions, and above all, how they were expressed by them. According to the Emotional Regulation model proposed by Gross in 2015, these emotions and their emergence result in a series of judgments that a person makes (Gross, 2015). Every emotion has some repercussions, like anger, which is a negative emotion that can trigger episodes of violence, or some conflict can arise due to the emotional struggles if they are not regulated properly, so it is important for an individual to regulate their emotions for a healthy lifestyle, as well as showing good performance in every walk of life. (Müller & Fritz, 2015; Filella et al., 2018).

Various studies have investigated emotional regulation, and they are occasionally connected to factors like subjective psychological well-being. (Ruini & Ryf, 2016; Yang et al., 2015). According to Mairean (2015) and Zamorano (2017), this applies to a person's developmental stage or their use of cognitive re-evaluation in educational settings.

Regulation of emotions needs much hard work and effort for students because people employ a wide variety of analyses and evaluations to manage their emotions. These procedures are crucial for integrating different methods into emotional control in educational settings. In addition, these are essential to give emotional tools to students and teachers for better teaching learning environments, to guide them in the academic field and for overall life experiences including social, academic and personal arena of an individual taking into account that improving one's ability to control emotions is crucial for a happier and better life (Hofmann et al., 2012; Oriol et al., 2017).

Coping strategies

An individual faces so many emotional and conflicting issues in his/her life, and this is the reason people manifest various behaviours, perceptions, and cognitions that enable them to manage such emotional situations one way or another, and these manifestations are known as coping strategies (Blake & Mouton, 1964). The majority of research on coping strategies used to manage different problems and challenges focused on factors like emotion and conflict (Cabanach et al., 2010).

In a study by Pascual et al. (2016), researchers examined the more and less effective coping strategies used during adolescence. The study was conducted on 762 adolescents aged between 16 and 18, and the gender differences were also assessed. The results of the correlational analyses indicated significant positive associations between various adaptive coping strategies. In addition, differences were observed in the coping approaches used by male and female students.

In recent years, the connection between coping strategies and people's emotional circumstances has been the subject of numerous studies. Some of the studies and investigations have shown that there lies a close relationship between coping strategies and people's ability to manage emotional situations (Martínez et al., 2011).

The most crucial aspect that has to be emphasized in educational settings is the lack of specialized centers or advisory services to assist students in addressing their general and emotional issues. For this reason, students use a variety of coping strategies to independently control and regulate their emotions. Another alarming situation that needs to be focused on is the availability of guidance services or mental health services, which are very meager for university students. Most emotionally troubled students do not undergo any therapeutic or counseling services (Zivin et al., 2009). University students' poor academic performance and decreased work ability are caused by mental health and emotional issues (Andrews & Wilding, 2004; Breslau et al., 2008). Such emotional and mental health problems, which are hindering the academic performance of university students, also emphasize the increasing requirement of providing counseling services to university students (Mahmood & Saleem, 2010; Saleem et al., 2013; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010).

Studies reveal that in recent years, interest in the study of coping and emotion control has increased, as reported by Gross & Thompson (2009) and Koole (2009), and due to this attention given to this field, many important and significant studies have been carried out. Among those prominent research studies, some of them were conducted by Garcia-Sanchez and Font-Guiteras (2008), Godoy-Izquierdo et al. (2008), Kring (2010), and Neipp et al. (2008).

Although coping and emotion regulation generally refer to fairly similar ideas, there are notable distinctions between the two. According to Schneider (1988), the term "coping process" describes a number of "thoughts and actions that enable people to handle difficult situations" (p.183). Therefore, coping refers to the attempts made to manage stressful or overwhelming internal and external demands as effectively as possible (reducing, minimizing, tolerating, or controlling). Folkman and Lazarus (1988) defined coping as the ever-evolving cognitive and behavioural attempts to manage particular external and/or internal pressures that are deemed to be challenging or surpassing an individual's resources. In contrast, the term "emotion regulation" encompasses both the management of positive and negative emotions.

Objectives of the Study

The current research aims:

1. To examine the emotional struggles faced by university students.
2. To explore the coping strategies used by undergraduate university students to regulate their emotions.

Research Questions

The current study seeks to answer the following research queries:

1. What are the emotional struggles faced by university students?
2. What are the coping strategies used by undergraduate university students to regulate their emotions?

Research Design

The current study supported the use of qualitative research methods and tools. According to Spencer et al. (2003), interviews in qualitative research offer a comprehensive picture of research participants' opinions and behaviours in relation to their entire lives. For the current study, semi-structured interviews were used with the specific goal of gaining a thorough grasp of respondents' perspectives on social reality (Fontana, 2002) and delving further into their experiences and perceptions of emotional intelligence.

Population and Sampling

Population

Students from private as well as public universities in Peshawar, Pakistan, developed the study's population. The study's primary participants were undergraduate students from all of Peshawar's universities.

Sample Size

Eight universities were chosen for the study by the researcher using a purposive sampling technique. To prevent bias and gender discrimination, the entire sample was drawn from four public and four private universities. Sixteen participants were purposefully chosen, and semi-structured interviews were used to gather the data.

Demographic Sheet

For the study, a thorough demographic matrix was created. Information on sex, the subject of study, family financial status, structure of the family, university name, and educational attainment were among the details recorded.

Results

An individual's ability to have fluency with emotions can be referred to as Emotional Intelligence. Owing to the fact that emotional intelligence is a frequently ignored subject matter in Pakistani cultures, particularly in school curricula, children often tend to grow up without being able to control their emotions in a variety of situations. Given that the primary focus of emotional intelligence (EI) is identifying one's emotional problems, including social and interpersonal relationships, the capacity to be emotionally self-aware, as well as being sensitive to others' feelings and emotions, it is imperative to understand the emotional feelings using empathic tools to identify the causes, since emotions and sentiments cannot and should not be disregarded. In the context of emotion, there needs to be a shift in focus from the emotionally harmful thinking or actions to prioritizing the behaviour assigned to health and productivity-related emotions. In order to work with psychological challenges and dilemmas, it is vital to recognize feelings that need space and attention. Moreover, understanding the significance of negative emotions, such as grief and regret, is equally necessary in order to be productive, useful, and beneficial for learning, managing stress, and psychological growth.

Several authors, including Cole et al. (1994); Thompson (1994), opine that emotion regulation "serves to avoid, shift, transform, minimize, inhibit or intensify emotions". Likewise, Gross and Thompson (2009) maintain that emotion regulation may soften, intensify, or simply maintain an emotion, depending on the individual's specific objectives. As for Koole (2009), emotion regulation is the collection of techniques people use to try to redirect their emotions' natural flow.

In understanding the various coping strategies, one fundamental concern is that little or no consideration has been given to the investigation of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of various coping and emotion regulation techniques. In an attempt to answer this fundamental question, various authors assert that, in general, one can agree that some coping strategies are more adequate than others.

According to Carver et al. (1989), active coping, planning, suppressing conflicting activities, restraint coping, positive reinterpretation, and seeking out social support for both practical and emotional reasons are examples of adaptive coping strategies.

Emotional management has become an integral component/aspect of a person's life, and EI plays a significant part in many narratives and recollections of a person's experiences. When the same interview questions were asked of each participant, their various answers revealed their personal experiences, their capacity to acquire emotional experiences, and their ability to handle them. The undergraduate students of the University of Peshawar recorded their struggles to control their emotions in the following ways:

Expression of Emotions

The researcher observed that quite a good number of students in senior semesters were considerably better at regulating their emotions effectively.

One student shared the following perspective:

Around most people, I don't hesitate to express my emotions easily when I am happy; however, I tend to be more reserved with expressing anger in public. One of my biggest problems is that I usually do not express my anger when other people are around. In my daily life interactions, I tend to be profoundly expressive; however, I become less expressive when I am dealing with problems or stress.

It implies that showing emotions cannot be the same for every person. Different people tend to express themselves differently. Furthermore, it is clear that most people display happiness in public but conceal inner sadness. Hiding our feelings of sadness is not considered healthy from a psychological perspective, as it can result in decreasing our psychological well-being and affect our emotional intelligence.

Themes of the Study

Playing Games and Engaging in Physical Activities

According to Koole (2009), focus, cognitive techniques, and emotion management for goal-oriented purposes appear to be more successful than physical ones like breathing or relaxation techniques. Koole concludes that bodily strategies appear to be rather effective when it comes to person-oriented strategies.

People have different strategies to cope with their emotional issues. One of the students said, *Playing the guitar is one of my favourite activities when I am low-spirited or sad. I feel that it makes me feel better. It enables me to share my emotions. I actually find it hard to be very "expressive". But I feel like I am communicating my sorrow to other people by playing the guitar, which gives me immense relief. So, I personally feel that playing guitar enables me to be profoundly expressive, and I believe this is the only way of expressing emotions because I cannot express myself to others in any other way. Besides, this seems to be the only solution, as I think it is difficult for me to communicate, and music helps me become more proficient at it.*

These collected student quotes demonstrate that not everyone finds it easy to express themselves in public. Many people are able to express themselves freely, but others often experience feelings of shyness or depression when they do so inadvertently or at times of weakness. According to the current study, college students exhibit a variety of emotional expressions, and each person often uses a unique method to control their emotions.

Sharing of Emotions with Best Friends

According to Saarni (1999), every person should ideally have a variety of coping strategies, which essentially consist of strategies for addressing issues and social support from family and friends.

Expressing my emotions to friends gives me an immense sense of relief, and we develop a sense of connection. Besides, I personally believe that it is usually very helpful for me to share my feelings with my friends. I share my feelings with one of my trustworthy friends. I always confide in him, and I don't hesitate to approach him for seeking solutions to my problems. Also, I always share my happy as well as sad moments with him. After expressing our feelings, we both gain knowledge from one another and share similar experiences.

Another participant recalled,

I used to be afraid of people, situations, and other things, but as time has passed by, I have come to understand that friends and family are there to support me to overcome any kind of troubling situation. Also, it gives me an opportunity to spend quality time together. And now I am able to face people who actually have a great affection for me, instead of merely considering how I should communicate with someone when I am feeling down. Because of this social support, I have been able to maintain more emotional stability within myself as well as help others attain emotional stability in themselves.

These recollections of the students showed that social support is one of the biggest elements for individuals to grow emotionally stable and strong. We often forget to assist our loved ones in overcoming their challenges and anxieties in our day-to-day lives. If we frequently lend a helping hand to others during difficult times, they will definitely become emotionally strong.

According to Goleman (1995) and Walton (2012), simply being conscious of one's feelings is not enough. They further assert that if someone does not respond appropriately after evaluating their mood, knowledge alone can be extremely detrimental. Additionally, the researcher found that after people were conscious of their emotional issues, they made efforts to deal with them personally to change them. Daniel Goleman (1995) stated that self-awareness depends critically on how an individual handles their emotions or moods.

Journal Writing and Discussions with Friends

Recognizing one's mood is the key component of self-awareness. Many respondents talked about this theme. Bradberry and Greaves (2005) are of the view that thinking about one's feelings or moods can lead to self-awareness. Participants in this study showed the pattern when they noticed a shift or change in their feelings toward a particular situation. For example, one of the respondents said that,

I have a sound understanding of my feelings; it simply made me understand that students who tend to have weaknesses in any of their skills often tend to become sad if somebody starts highlighting their weaknesses. She further added that in order to understand my emotions better, I have started taking some assistance in the form of group discussions and journal writing. I have realized that I have gained a good deal of self-awareness; my needs and wants, who I am as a person, as well as an increased awareness of the kind of person I want to be.

The quote above makes it clear that it is essential to discuss our emotional issues with our close ones. And the journal writing is an extra effort to cope with the emotions because in this way a person can keep the records of moods, emotional ups and downs, and analyze their own emotions logically and critically. These strategies can help other students to make their emotional life better for academic and social purposes.

Likewise, another respondent said,

I personally believe, emotionally, I have learned a lot. Through discussions and gatherings with my friends who had to face similar problems, I realized that the way other people were experiencing various emotions was the same as I experienced during certain life challenges. Now I am learning the ways of dealing with one's emotions or moods because knowing emotions is one thing; managing them rationally and constructively is quite another.

Again, it can be inferred from the above-mentioned quote that emotional understanding is no less than an art, and through discussions and writing about our problems, people can understand their own emotions and those of others.

Public Dealings and Public Speaking

One of the respondents recalled,

Learning to recognize my moods has been one of my biggest achievements because, with the passage of time, it has made it possible for me to develop my emotional intelligence. Besides, it has been extremely helpful for me in dealing with public speaking. Some people find it difficult to control their emotions in particular circumstances, but I improved my presentation and social skills. I am able to fill the gap, guided by example, and demonstrate to others that I am aware of their feelings as well as my own.

In the aforementioned quotation, the student tries to deal with his emotional problems by speaking and interacting with others in public. His personal efforts have helped him make his life better through understanding his emotions. Also, it has been helpful for him to have a clear understanding of other individuals' emotions.

Optimism

Goleman (1995) asserts that optimism tends to exist when an individual feels empowered to resolve a problem or deal with a particular situation. When participants in this study were asked to recall their greatest emotion coping strategies, the researcher analysed the cases using the interview data and discovered that many of them supported feeling hopeful about improving emotional awareness. A female student commented,

There always exists a possibility to connect with others in a positive way, whether they are like you or different from you philosophically. This type of mindset helped me become more optimistic and open-minded due to my increased empathy. Also, it made me realize that we should become more compassionate since everyone has faults and no single individual is perfect. We are all struggling constantly, and at times, there are things that we have

no control over. There are things we are not good at, but in every situation, we should avoid showing pessimism because it ends up ruining everything.

Similarly, another student commented,

We should never adopt a negative or pessimistic approach, even if something went wrong in our lives. It is human nature to get sad and worried, but we should not forget that life has different meanings and lessons to convey. When we see other people suffering, our own suffering tends to seem smaller in comparison. We should tend to be calm and positive about things because being optimistic is one of the main goals of life.

Friendly and Family Connections

Some respondents see quality lifelong friendly relationships as the best coping strategies. Despite receiving very few comments, this theme has a profoundly emotional effect. For example, the terms "old friends," "school friends," and "childhood friends" were frequently used by undergraduate interviewees. Research carried out in this area suggests that people out there tend to connect with friends and long-lasting connections, like school friends, etc. However, in this sense, women are more likely to react to problems emotionally and share them with friends and family, whereas men are more likely to address the issues or circumstances or deny them entirely (Stone & Neale, 1984).

One of the respondents stated,

I was able to form strong bonds and friendships as a child with many friends who lived nearby, or even my classmates. The answer then listed a few names of the buddies with whom he still has a close relationship.

Another student shared a story of when she greeted a person very pleasantly she met in university on orientation day, and she said, *"I've known her for years, and we used to go to school together. I can actually recall that we were best friends."*

Another student of the 6th semester described her plan to continue her friendship after graduating, as according to her, many of her classmates are her schoolmates. She further added that she is going to arrange meetups and reunions in the future to keep her friendships intact:

I'm not only dreaming and planning to do all this, but I know I'm going to be very practical about accomplishing the goals of friendship for the rest of my life. She continued that she will also stay in touch with her university and the students that she met there.

These experiences are shared by students because they think that a person can regulate their emotions well if he/she have a lifelong connection with their best friends. And they use these connections as a strategy to regulate and tackle their emotions well when they are among their friends.

Discussion

The current study was conducted to highlight and uncover the strategies that students employ directly or indirectly to cope with their emotional struggles in their university life. The study has been undertaken in various universities in Peshawar city, and the qualitative data were collected from undergraduate university students. The qualitative data gathered from the students showed that they faced various emotional struggles, and then they expressed how they used various strategies as a means of coping with emotional struggles.

When the same interview questions were posed to each participant, their diverse and varied answers revealed their unique experiences as well as their capacities for developing emotional issues and managing them. It was observed and judged by the researcher that most of the students in senior semesters were much better at regulating their emotions effectively. Different students, along with their emotional issues, have different strategies to cope with their emotions. The researcher observed and evaluated that the majority of senior semester students were significantly more proficient at effectively managing their emotions. Many students expressed that they can express themselves freely, yet there were other students who felt shy or inhibited when they expressed themselves in their weak moments. In the current study, it shows that

undergraduate students used various strategies, such as playing games to cope with their issues, while others wrote journals and did creative writing to manage emotions effectively.

Some of the respondents maintained that during facing and coping with emotional issues, social support from friends, family, and co-workers had a significant impact. Many participants in the current study reported that they have trouble expressing their feelings in public, while some respondents reported feeling at ease and did not shy away from expressing emotions with family and friends. One of the very important and prominent strategies used by respondents was being religious during emotional issues. Being a religious person, this provides a strong belief that if someone is low-spirited, angry, despondent, or anxious about anything, they should engage themselves in various religious activities, as this will give them immense emotional relief. Some students also expressed that one should have a strong outlook among the public to stay emotionally strong.

The study's conclusions also emphasized an essential coping strategy employed by students, which was their participation in public events like public speaking. Through these exercises, students were able to better understand both their own and other people's emotions.

The participants of the current study reflected on their greatest emotional coping strategies, which were feeling optimistic about developing better emotional understanding. Many students shared that being open-minded to new situations is also connected to optimism. All of the samples had one thing in common: they were able to encounter a range of situations by spending more time in college and engaging with people. With this, the individuals learned to cope with and regulate their emotions. It is important to understand that coping with their emotions positively and rationally benefits them in the long run for their personal, academic, and professional lives.

This study concluded that Emotional intelligence is an important aspect of every individual's life and also the focal concern of an undergraduate university student for the maintenance of their overall well-being and accomplishment of academic progress. Besides, excellent teachers, academic brilliance, and a competitive curriculum tackling emotional issues are essential aspects in order to live a successful life.

Undergraduate students in the current study showed that although they engage in a wide range of activities according to their interests, addressing their emotional issues is a motivator for making a difference and making sure that their time in school is full of pleasant moments rather than just academic endeavours. They used various strategies to cope with their emotions logically and positively.

The study found that even when students engage in a variety of campus activities, their quest for emotional stability persists throughout their academic and personal lives as undergraduates. As a result, universities should encourage their students to stay involved on campus and give them the resources and opportunities they need to manage their emotions in a way that promotes personal development.

It is concluded that the high level of emotional intelligence can help students to calm and pacify themselves in challenging situations so that they can focus on their studies and acquire other information as well. Thus, it will contribute to a balanced life of undergraduate students.

In addition to effective and carefully planned learning methodologies, the current study found that students may be able to understand coping strategies and manage their emotional selves. In addition to it, they need to cope with those emotional issues in order for their performance not to be hindered in any way. In this study, students have expressed openly how they cope with emotional struggles in their own way, but it was concluded that institutions may also provide them with help to cope with emotional struggles for early understanding and detection of emotional issues.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent

Special efforts were taken to guarantee the issues of integrity, anonymity, and secrecy by getting informed consent and recognizing the contributions of earlier researchers in the field. Prior to participating in the research as respondents, the participants in this study were thoroughly informed about the relevant facts. Additionally, the transcribed and audio-recorded data were stored properly. The researcher made sure that the respondents were treated with dignity and respect and that the data were kept completely confidential. The respondents were informed that they could leave the study at any time. In order to prevent prejudice and discrimination against participants, pseudonyms were employed for the data. Throughout the study, the researcher made sure that the participants were not physically, psychologically, or emotionally harmed.

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