



Adolescent Coping and Anxiety

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Abstract

The primary goal of this study was to explore the association between coping and anxiety during adolescence. More specifically, this study examined whether adolescents who use certain coping styles, such as denial or humor, are more at-risk for developing anxiety problems. The moderating effects of gender and ethnicity also were assessed. The participants included 1,001 9th and 10th grade adolescents who completed a packet of questionnaires. Results indicated that girls had higher levels of religious coping and venting emotions than boys. In contrast, boys were found to have higher levels of humor coping than girls. Girls also were found to have higher levels of anxiety than boys. Ethnic differences also were found, with African American adolescents having the highest level of religious coping.

Sample

- 1,001 adolescent boys (47%) and girls (53%)
- Diversity: 59% Caucasian; 22% African American, 12% Hispanic, 2% Asian, 5% Other
- Age range = 15-17 years old; Mean age = 16.09 (SD=.68)
- All adolescents were 10th (58%) or 11th (42%) grade students attending a public high school in Delaware, Maryland, or Pennsylvania

Measures

Adolescent Anxiety

The *Screen for Child Anxiety Related Disorders* (SCARED; Birmaher, Khetarpal, Cully, Brent, & McKenzie, 1995) was used to measure adolescent anxiety. The SCARED includes 41-items, which are completed in reference to the last three months. SCARED items were summed to reflect an overall anxiety score. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the SCARED total score in our sample was .93.

Adolescent Coping

The *COPE* (COPE; Carver et al., 1989) was used to measure how adolescents cope during difficult or stressful events in their lives. There are 36 total items which are summed to create a score for each subscale of coping. Each subscale represents a theoretical model of coping. This study used the following coping subscales: Humor, Religious Coping, Venting Emotions and Denial. In our sample, the Cronbach alpha coefficient for the subscales were: Humor (.86), Religious coping (.88), Venting Emotions (.81) and Denial (.78).

Procedures

The participants were part of the larger research project (The University of Delaware's Adolescent Adjustment Project). In the spring of 2007, trained research personnel surveyed the adolescents who provided assent and whose parents provided consent. The self-report survey was administered in school and took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Adolescents were given a movie pass for their participation.

Results

Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine the association between adolescent coping and anxiety. ANOVA models were conducted to examine whether coping and anxiety differed by gender or ethnicity.

1) *Is coping associated with anxiety during adolescence?*

As shown in Table 2, venting emotions and denial were related to anxiety for both boys and girls, indicating that boys and girls with higher levels of venting emotions and denial had significantly higher anxiety levels.

2) *Does coping during adolescence differ by gender?*

Gender differences were found for humor ($F(1, 952) = 5.12, p < .05$), with boys having higher levels of humor coping than girls. Gender differences also were found for venting emotions ($F(1, 961) = 146.69, p < .05$) and religious coping ($F(1, 946) = 11.65, p < .05$) with girls using these coping strategies more frequently than boys (See Table 1).

3) *Does anxiety during adolescence differ by gender?*

As shown in Table 1, there was a significant difference for adolescent anxiety by gender ($F(1, 884) = 72.77, p < .05$) with girls having higher levels of anxiety than boys.

4) *Does coping differ by ethnicity during adolescence?*

There was a significant difference for religious coping by ethnicity ($F(3, 872) = 40.18, p < .05$). This difference indicated that African American adolescents had the highest levels of religious coping, compared to Caucasian and Hispanic adolescents (See Table 3).

5) *Does anxiety differ during adolescence by ethnicity?*

As shown in Table 3 anxiety did not differ by ethnicity.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations among Study Variables by Gender

Measure	Girls Mean (SD)	Boys Mean (SD)
Venting Emotions	+9.87 (3.21)	7.46 (2.91)
Religious Coping	+9.28 (4.13)	8.41 (3.71)
Humor Coping	+8.74 (3.55)	9.25 (3.46)
Denial	6.67 (2.86)	6.41 (2.77)
Total Anxiety Score	+19.70 (12.72)	+12.75 (11.39)

+ = significant gender difference

Table 2
Correlations between Coping and Anxiety

Measure	1	2	3	4	5
1. Venting Emotions	-----	.09*	.12**	.21***	.29***
2. Religious Coping	.28***	-----	.00	.37***	-.04
3. Humor Coping	.22***	.11*	-----	.37***	.02
4. Denial	.47***	.32***	.31***	-----	.31***
5. Total Anxiety Score	.35***	.10	.05	.33***	-----

Note. Correlations for boys and girls are presented below the diagonal and above the diagonal, respectively. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations among Study Variables by Ethnicity

Measure	Caucasian	African American	Hispanic	Asian
Venting Emotions	8.68 (3.34)	.89 (3.19)	.86 (3.37)	9.29 (3.39)
Religious Coping	+7.93 (3.78)	+11.30 (3.62)	+8.95 (3.40)	9.30 (4.12)
Humor Coping	9.27 (3.58)	8.86 (3.33)	8.41 (3.36)	8.66 (3.28)
Denial	6.40 (2.70)	6.55 (2.83)	7.00 (3.03)	6.96 (2.60)
Total Anxiety Score	16.78 (12.85)	15.15 (12.23)	18.08 (12.62)	17.74 (10.02)

+ = significant difference between ethnicity

Conclusions

The results from this study indicated that coping styles differ by gender as girls were found to be more likely to use religious coping and venting emotions than boys. In contrast, boys were more likely to use humor to cope with stress than were girls. Consistent with the literature, girls were found to have higher levels of anxiety than boys. However, for both boys and girls, venting emotions and denial were related to higher anxiety levels. This finding also is consistent with previous literature, in that venting emotions and denial have been found to correlate with higher levels of anxiety. Finally, ethnic differences revealed that African American adolescents were the most likely to use religious coping when confronted with stress, in comparison to Caucasian and Hispanic adolescents. There were no significant differences found for anxiety by ethnicity. These results underscore the importance of examining coping strategies used during the developmental period of adolescence that is associated with experiencing many difficult stressors, which have shown to more negatively impact female adolescents.