



Review Article

Adjustment Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Adolescence is an important developmental stage characterised by major biological, psychological and social transformations. For many immigrant girls, there are unique social-emotional issues that they might face with issues of identity formation, body image pressures and concerns, peer relationships, academic challenges and demands from family members to succeed as well as regulation of a range of emotions. If not appropriately addressed, these issues can cause psychological distress, such as anxiety and depressive symptoms. This review article integrates the literature on the central stressors encountered by teenage girls and their attempts to manage. They emphasise adaptive strategies, like social support, problem-focused coping, and cognitive reappraisal, as well as maladaptive responses including rumination and avoidance. The identification of these factors is necessary for the development of psychosocial interventions aimed at fostering resilience and adaptive responding during adolescence.

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence, broadly referred to as the period of development from age 10 to age 19 (World Health Organisation, 2021), is a time of rapid physical, cognitive and social change. This time is one of puberty and self-identity discovery for girls, but it can also be accompanied by increased societal demands over appearance, relationships, and work at school (Compas et al., 2017). During this period, regulation is how efficiently the adolescent adjusts to internal changes and external demands. Adjustment problems are risk factors for negative mood and maladaptive behavioural and psychiatric disorders (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014).

Insight into the complexities of adjustment difficulties and how girls cope is important for educators, clinicians, and parents. This review highlights the available literature on adjustment problems experienced by adolescent girls and how they cope with these challenges.

Adjustment Challenges in Adolescent Girls

Identity and Self-Concept Development

Identity development is considered one of the major tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). For girls, this process is often layered with the norms of femininity and what makes a successful girl. Studies found that girls are particularly affected by societal pressures to be thin or stereotypically pretty and social mandates of relational harmony, as they also impact self-worth and mental health (Harter, 2012). Lower self-concept is related to depressive symptomatology, anxiety and social withdrawal (Mann et al., 2004).

Body Image and Physical Appearance

Adolescent girls, children, and their body image concerns in response to social focus on thinness and beauty (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2006). This pressure is associated with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating behaviours and unhealthy weight control practices (Stice et al., 2011). The relationship between sociocultural standards for beauty and girls' internalisation of those norms has been demonstrated across cultures with similar psychological distress outcomes (Calogero et al., 2011).

Peer Relationships and Social Comparison

During adolescence, students experience an increase in the nature and size of their peer relationships as well as an accompanying reliance on acceptance by peers (Brown & Larson, 2009). The relationships among girls are often close and emotionally intense, which is a source of both support and conflict. Forms of relational aggression, such as social exclusion and indirect comparisons on social media sites, are associated with girls' depressive symptoms and lower self-worth (Criss et al., 2015; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). These dynamics make the social adjustment of girls difficult and can increase stress.

Academic Expectations and Performance Pressure

Academics is another area of stress. Girls are more likely to express coping motives associated with personal standards and family social norms (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Although academic engagement may be protective, maladaptive perfectionistic concerns are associated with both anxiety and burnout (Flett et al., 2016).

Family Dynamics and Emotional Regulation

Family environment is an important factor influencing adjustment processes. Adolescents who have a connected family relationship showed better emotional control and competence (Steinberg, 2001). Yet, family conflict, parental criticism, and lack of emotional attunement may compound adjustment problems (Sheeber et al., 2001). Parental control of parent-child relationships correlates with coping styles, while working in accordance with the personal resources results in adaptive approach to stress.

Mental Health Challenges

Adolescent girls exhibit a greater preponderance of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and self-injury, than boys (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002). Such gender differences likely result from hormonal changes, social pressures, and learned coping mechanisms. Suicide attempts are a major concern, even if many remain underestimated and associated with maladaptive adjustment patterns (Miller et al., 2017).

Coping Mechanisms in Adolescent Girls

Coping is defined as cognitive and behavioural attempts to balance stress and demands which exceed an individual's resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping mechanisms can be broadly divided into adaptive (e.g. problem-solving, emotional regulation) and maladaptive (e.g., avoidant, ruminative). Gender has been reported to play a mediating role in coping styles; girls are more likely to use emotion-focused coping strategies than boys, which can act as either protective (ie, buffering stress) or exacerbating effects of the model depending on which type of account is active (Ptacek et al., 1994)

Adaptive Coping Strategies

Social Support

Social support is one of the most well-documented protective factors for girls during their adolescent years. Nurturing friendships with peers, parents and mentors creates emotional security and coping skills. Girls who believe in a strong societal acceptance reveal fewer symptoms of depression and demonstrate greater stress coping abilities (Rueger et al., 2016). Sisterhood support groups and mentorship programs have been shown to positively influence girls' self-esteem and coping ability.

Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping attempts to manage or alter the stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For instance, academic stress could be reduced by time management, goal setting, and the use of academic resources. Girls who employ problem-focused strategies appear to show better psychosocial adjustment and greater perceived control over stressors (Compas et al., 2017)

Cognitive Re-appraisal

Cognitive reappraisal is the ability to change negative thoughts to more positive or realistic ones. This focus of attention on mental or written reframing is characteristic of humorists (Gross, 2015), and it is a common quality in mindfulness-based and cognitive-behavioural approaches aimed at emotion regulation that provide adaptive strategies to decrease emotional distress. This approach has been associated with better emotional regulation and less anxiety in adolescent girls.

Engagement in Extracurricular and Creative Activities

Participation in sports and arts or hobby groups may serve as a positive means of stress-reduction and exploration of identity. Participation in such activities increases self-efficacy, sense of belonging to the group and well-being (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). They provide structure among peers and increase coping flexibility.

Maladaptive Coping and Risk Factors

Adolescent Girls. While there are successful adaptive strategies, it is not uncommon for adolescent girls to use maladaptive coping (e.g., rumination, social withdrawal, and avoidance behaviours). Of all of the forms of thought, rumination has been associated with sustained levels of negative affect and risk for depression [25]. Avoidance coping, excessive screen time and denial included, is a good short-term distraction while you are waiting for something to change, but it’s not particularly helpful in the longrun. Another related issue is substance use as a coping strategy, which has identified associations with peer influence and emotional distress (Wills et al., 2006).

Gender Differences in Coping

Girls are reported to be more prone to using emotion-focused coping, with boys using problem-focused strategies (Ptacek et al., 1994). Although emotion-focused coping may allow for emotional

expression and social bonds, in conjunction with rumination, it can exacerbate psychological suffering. The types of interventions that are particularly effective for girls with elevated levels of emotional reactivity include those that focus on improving problem-solving and stress-coping skills.

Cultural and Societal Influences

Cultural norms and societal expectations also influence adjustment difficulties and coping strategies. In collectivist cultural contexts, family interdependence and community standards of behaviour may impact girls' clothing fitting differently than in individualistic cultural contexts (Chen et al.). For instance, more weight may be given to academic achievement and family obedience, which can influence stress appraisal and coping patterns. By contrast, Western values toward individuality might emphasise self-expression and autonomy, such that coping may be influenced in how girls adapt to stress.

Implications for Interventions and Practice

Positive coping and resilience-enhancing interventions are critical for promoting the healthy adjustment of adolescent girls. School-based interventions that support children in acquiring such skills as coping with stress, regulating emotions, or the development of social competencies have proven effective for decreasing anxiety and increasing well-being (Greenberg et al., 2003). Levels of support: Cognitive-behavioural interventions, peer support groups and family therapy can offer multi-tiered assistance.

Role of Parents and Educators

Parents and teachers are key in promoting adaptive coping. Open communication, validating feelings, and providing examples of constructive coping strategies model help-seeking behaviours among adolescents. Educational systems can incorporate psycho-social-based curricula that emphasise emotional intelligence, conflict resolution and time management.

Technology and Mental Health Support

Online resources and telepsychology tools are available for adolescent girls to acquire coping strategies. Web-based support communities, mental health apps and teletherapy services can help to bridge the gap in care, particularly in underserved areas. But balance is necessary to ensure a healthy digital foundation.

Table 1: Summary on Adjustment Challenges and Coping Mechanisms in Adolescent Girls

Domain	Key Adjustment Challenges	Common Coping Mechanisms	Outcomes
Identity & Self-concept	Low self-esteem, identity confusion, and social pressure	Cognitive reappraisal, self-reflection, and peer support	Improved self-confidence and emotional stability
Body Image	Body dissatisfaction, appearance anxiety, eating concerns	Social comparison regulation, counselling, mindfulness	Reduced body image distress
Peer Relationships	Peer pressure, relational aggression, and social exclusion	Seeking social support and communication skills	Better social adjustment
Academic Adjustment	Performance pressure, stress, and perfectionism	Time management, problem-focused coping	Enhanced academic resilience
Family Environment	Parent-child conflict, lack of emotional support	Family communication, emotional expression	Improved emotional regulation
Mental Health	Anxiety, depression, rumination	Adaptive coping, therapy, and support networks	Reduced psychological distress
Coping Style Patterns	Emotion-focused coping, rumination	Skill-based coping training	Healthier stress management

CONCLUSION

Adolescent girls encounter a myriad of adjustment issues, including identity formation, body image concerns, peer relations, academic stress, and emotional regulation. How individuals cope varies from adaptive strategies (e.g. social support and problem-focused coping) to maladaptive patterns (e.g. rumination and avoidance). Stress management, supportive relationships, resilience and similar protective factors appear to play a key role in healthy adjustment. A team approach with families, educators and mental health professionals is important to help girls navigate this formative time.

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