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# Coping Style and Defence Mechanisms among Traumatized and Non-Traumatized Adolescents in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Coping and psychological defence skills are frequently used when individuals experience trauma, stress, and anxiety.

**Objective:** To examine the roles of Coping and psychological defence skills in traumatized adolescents exhibiting post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms.

**Methods:** A sample of 1016 adolescents aged 12 to 17 answered the Coping Style Questionnaire-3, Defence Style Questionnaire-40, Traumatic Event Checklist, Harvard Trauma Questionnaire and a socio-demographic questionnaire.

**Results:** Results showed that traumatized adolescents significantly used all coping styles: emotional focused, avoidance, rational, and detached. Similarly, adolescents with PTSD symptoms significantly used all the coping styles than those without PTSD symptoms: emotional focused, avoidance, rational and detached. Traumatized adolescents significantly used immature style, mature style than non-traumatized adolescents. Similarly, adolescents with PTSD symptoms significantly used immature defence style, mature style and neurotic style.

**Conclusion:** Traumatized adolescents demonstrate a greater use of avoidance coping style, whereas non-traumatized adolescents tend to use rational coping style. Improving coping skills might directly improve traumatized adolescents' daily functioning.

**Key Words:** Coping, Defence, Trauma adolescents, Post traumatic stress disorder

## INTRODUCTION

Developmentally, adolescence is a period where individuals experience many life changes that require them to adapt to different values, attitudes, and social expectations so that their transition to adulthood would be more successful.<sup>1</sup> Adolescents are uncertain regarding their identity, aware of no longer being a child but not yet ready to be an adult. The developmental challenges become worse if adolescents experience potentially traumatic events such as road accidents, health-related injuries,<sup>2,3</sup> COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>3</sup> death of someone loved, sexual abuse and other negative life events. At this developmental stage, adolescents learn to independently solve their problems and become able to adopt positive thinking patterns. Therefore, adolescents may develop strategies to cope with much negative life challenges.<sup>4</sup>

The ability of adolescents to cope with life challenges can impact their mental<sup>6</sup>. Poor coping skills may lead adolescents to be more vulnerable in dealing with negative life events and stressors. For example, avoidance coping styles among adolescents were found to be significantly correlated with mental disorders.<sup>4,5</sup> However, before reporting any outcomes or conclusions regarding the effectiveness of different coping strategies, the role of defence mechanisms must be considered. This is because individual descriptions of their coping strategies and their descriptions of the outcomes are both influenced by defence mechanisms.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Fifth Edition (DSM-5), individuals are protected from internal or external dangers and stressors using their defence mechanisms and coping styles.<sup>7</sup> There are some overlaps between coping and defence mechanisms, but it is also clear that there are theoretical differences.<sup>8-10</sup> Coping

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