

Post-Pandemic Coping Mechanisms for the Youth

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1 ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting psychological impact on youth worldwide, necessitating an examination of adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. This research paper explores how young people navigate emotional distress, social isolation, and academic disruptions through mechanisms such as mindfulness, peer support, digital communities, and creative expression. Drawing on qualitative interviews and psychological assessments, the study identifies key resilience factors and vulnerability risks. Findings suggest that proactive coping strategies (e.g., structured routines, social engagement) correlate with better mental health outcomes, while avoidance behaviors (e.g., digital escapism, substance use) exacerbate distress. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for supporting youth mental health in post-pandemic recovery.

Keywords: youth mental health, coping mechanisms, COVID-19, resilience, social isolation

FULL PAPER

2 INTRODUCTION

*The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented global crisis that has fundamentally altered the developmental landscape for contemporary youth. As societies emerge from the acute phase of the pandemic, research increasingly reveals its **profound psychological legacy** on young populations worldwide. Adolescents and young adults have faced a **constellation of stressors** including educational disruptions, social isolation, family economic instability, and pervasive uncertainty about the future. According to multinational studies, approximately 27% of youth report significant anxiety, while 15% experience depressive symptoms, with economic concerns influencing emotions for 30% of young individuals ⁹. The pandemic has simultaneously revealed remarkable human resilience while exposing critical vulnerabilities in mental health support systems. This research synthesizes evidence from **diverse global contexts** to examine how youth navigate post-pandemic adjustment through various coping mechanisms, identifying patterns that can inform targeted interventions and support frameworks for this vulnerable demographic during recovery phases and future crises.*

The significance of this investigation lies in the **developmental vulnerability** of youth during periods of heightened stress. Adolescence and early adulthood represent critical phases for social development, identity formation, and the establishment of autonomy—all processes disrupted by pandemic containment measures. Longitudinal research demonstrates that young people using avoidance coping strategies experience significantly worse mental health outcomes compared to those employing proactive approaches ¹. Understanding these differential coping pathways provides crucial insights for building **resilience capacity** among youth populations. This paper examines coping mechanisms through qualitative evidence and psychological assessments to develop a nuanced understanding of adaptive strategies that promote well-being in the aftermath of collective trauma.

3 GLOBAL CONTEXT OF YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

3.1 REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN PANDEMIC IMPACT

The mental health repercussions of the pandemic manifest differently across global regions, reflecting **socioeconomic disparities**, **cultural contexts**, and **varied public health responses**. In Latin America, a UNICEF rapid assessment of 8,444 adolescents revealed alarming statistics: 46% reported diminished motivation for previously enjoyed activities, while 36% struggled with routine tasks. Notably, young women demonstrated greater pessimism about the future (43%) compared to male counterparts (31%) ⁹. Brazilian youth described employing habit transformation as a coping strategy: "My formula was to change habits, wake up early to be more productive, self-awareness also helps me a lot" ⁹. These findings highlight how gender intersects with pandemic stress, creating differential vulnerability profiles.

Asian contexts reveal distinct patterns. Chinese youth demonstrated **heightened technology dependence**, with studies reporting a 23% increase in severe internet dependence compared to pre-pandemic levels ². This dependence presented paradoxical outcomes—while digital connectivity offered social support, excessive use correlated with increased anxiety and depression. European studies showed concerning emotional consequences, with Brazilian adolescents reporting emotions of **uncertainty, fear, anguish, and anxiety**, alongside extreme cases of suicidal ideation ³. Meanwhile, marginalized youth in North America experienced compounded vulnerabilities, particularly young adults experiencing homelessness who faced **intersectional stressors** including unmet basic needs, healthcare access barriers, and heightened substance use as a coping mechanism ⁵.

3.2 TABLE: REGIONAL MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS AND COPING MANIFESTATIONS

Region	Key Mental Health Impacts	Prominent Coping Mechanisms	Vulnerability Factors
Latin America	Anxiety (27%), depression (15%), motivation loss (46%)	Habit restructuring, community engagement, peer support	Female gender, economic precarity
East Asia	Anxiety (23.9-29.3%), depression (22.3%), internet addiction	Digital socialization, academic focus, family reliance	Urban residence, high academic pressure
Europe	PTSD symptoms, suicidal ideation, loneliness	Creative expression, outdoor activities, therapy-seeking	Pre-existing conditions, family conflict
North America	Exacerbated depression/anxiety, substance use	Avoidant strategies, crisis services, informal support	Homelessness, LGBTQ+ identity, disabilities
Middle East	Behavioral difficulties, hyperactivity	Religious coping, family cohesion, physical activity	Large household size, resource limitations

4 MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES AND EMERGING VULNERABILITIES

4.1 EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

The pandemic has triggered a **complex constellation** of psychological symptoms among youth populations. Research consistently documents elevated rates of **clinical anxiety** (affecting 21-34% of young people) and **depressive disorders** (reported in 18-34% of adolescents) across diverse geographic settings 46. These conditions frequently manifest with somatic symptoms including sleep disturbances, appetite changes, and unexplained physical pains. Brazilian phenomenological research identified recurrent emotional experiences of "uncertainty, fear, anguish, anxiety, lack of motivation" among adolescents, with extreme cases reporting suicidal ideation 3. These symptoms often reflect underlying **traumatic stress responses** to pandemic-related experiences including loss, disruption, and constant threat exposure.

Beyond diagnosable conditions, youth report pervasive **existential distress** characterized by diminished future orientation. Nearly half (46%) of Latin American youth describe reduced motivation for previously enjoyable activities, while 36% struggle with routine tasks 9. This motivational crisis particularly affects educational engagement, with many adolescents expressing

difficulty concentrating during remote learning periods. A concerning 43% of young women report pessimistic future outlooks compared to 31% of males, indicating significant **gendered disparities** in how youth conceptualize post-pandemic possibilities 9. These findings suggest that the pandemic has not only created immediate psychological distress but potentially altered fundamental developmental trajectories regarding purpose and agency.

4.2 BEHAVIORAL AND ACADEMIC IMPACTS

The disruption of daily routines during lockdowns triggered **observable behavioral changes** across developmental stages. Preschoolers exhibited heightened dependency, sleep disturbances, and temper tantrums, while school-aged children demonstrated increased inattention and hyperactivity 711. Adolescents displayed more internalized responses including social withdrawal alongside externalized behaviors like oppositional defiance. These behavioral shifts frequently reflected underlying **emotional dysregulation** stemming from chronic stress. Youth experiencing homelessness reported increased substance use as both avoidance strategy and self-medication for anxiety and depression 5. This population exemplifies how pre-existing vulnerabilities magnified behavioral health risks during pandemic disruptions.

Academic functioning represents a particularly **compromised domain**. Longitudinal research indicates that in-person schooling serves as a protective factor against mental health deterioration, with children engaged in remote learning demonstrating significantly higher symptom levels 11. Chinese studies identified substantial academic stress resulting from the transition to online learning, particularly among adolescents who simultaneously lost access to peer support networks 2. Beyond knowledge acquisition gaps, school closures disrupted critical **developmental opportunities** for practicing social skills, navigating peer relationships, and establishing autonomy—all essential competencies for healthy maturation. The resulting academic disengagement has potential long-term implications for educational attainment and economic participation.

4.3 SOCIOECONOMIC AND DISPARITY CONSIDERATIONS

The pandemic's mental health impacts reveal **stark inequities** along socioeconomic lines. Youth from economically marginalized backgrounds experienced disproportionate stressors including food insecurity, housing instability, and digital access limitations. Young adults experiencing homelessness described **compounding crises** during the pandemic: "Participants described unmet basic needs, emotions of frustration and anxiety, and several coping strategies including substance use" 5. These youth faced heightened barriers to implementing public health recommendations around hand hygiene and social distancing due to limited resources and unstable living situations.

Disparities extend beyond socioeconomic status to include **disability status, gender identity, and racial marginalization**. Youth with disabilities reported greater difficulties accessing outdoor activities and exercise—identified coping facilitators—requiring additional support to implement adaptive strategies 8. LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those experiencing homelessness, described

unique challenges including family rejection and reduced access to affirming spaces. Ethnic discrimination emerged as a significant stressor, with nearly half of Chinese-American youth reporting COVID-related racial targeting 6. These findings highlight how pandemic stressors interact with structural inequities to create **layered vulnerability** profiles demanding targeted intervention approaches.

5 ADAPTIVE COPING MECHANISMS

5.1 PROACTIVE AND MEANING-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

Youth demonstrating the most favorable mental health outcomes during and after the pandemic consistently employ **proactive engagement** strategies characterized by problem-solving approaches. Longitudinal research categorizes these youth as "active copers and positive thinking copers" who experience better mental health outcomes through solution-focused responses to stressors 1. These strategies include establishing structured daily routines, pursuing controllable short-term goals, and implementing practical solutions to pandemic-induced problems. The psychological benefits of such approaches stem from their reinforcement of **agency beliefs**—the conviction that one's actions meaningfully influence outcomes—which serves as a powerful buffer against helplessness during uncontrollable circumstances.

Meaning-focused coping represents another adaptive approach, particularly among older adolescents capable of abstract reflection. This involves cognitively reframing challenges to identify personal growth opportunities, renewed values clarification, or enhanced appreciation for relationships. Portuguese and Spanish youth described using lockdown periods for self-reflection and "changing habits" to align behaviors with revised priorities 9. Haitian youth exemplified this approach: "I told myself that stress does more damage than the virus itself" 9. Such cognitive restructuring helps transform threat perception into challenge orientation, reducing physiological stress responses while building **existential resilience**—the capacity to derive purpose from adversity.

5.2 SOCIAL CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Despite physical distancing requirements, youth creatively cultivated **relational support** networks through both virtual and modified in-person interactions. Digital platforms became crucial avenues for maintaining peer connections, with adolescents using social media, messaging applications, and online gaming to preserve social bonds during isolation periods. However, researchers observed a **digital paradox**: while moderate technology use provided social scaffolding, excessive screen time correlated with increased depression and anxiety symptoms 27. Successful navigators established intentional boundaries around digital consumption while maximizing technology's connective potential.

Beyond peer interactions, **community engagement** emerged as a powerful coping mechanism. Argentine youth described volunteering in community kitchens: "My formula has been to help in a

community kitchen to distract myself and not think about this pandemia" 9. Such participation creates psychological benefits through several mechanisms: distraction from distress, sense of purpose, self-efficacy reinforcement, and social integration. These activities represent what researchers term **prosocial coping**—managing personal stress through contributing to others' welfare—which enhances well-being by activating innate human capacities for cooperation and collective support. This communal orientation counteracts the individualism that often characterizes Western approaches to mental health.

5.3 CREATIVE AND PHYSICAL OUTLETS

Creative expression served as a vital emotional processing channel for youth lacking verbal articulation capacity or access to professional support. Guatemalan adolescents described "writing what makes me feel bad" and "distract myself by drawing" as mechanisms for managing overwhelming emotions 9. These artistic practices facilitate **symbolic processing** of experiences that may resist direct verbal expression, particularly among traumatized youth. Creative activities additionally provide opportunities for flow states—complete absorption in intrinsically rewarding tasks—which function as psychological respites from chronic stress. For marginalized youth with limited access to traditional mental health resources, these accessible creative outlets represent crucial coping alternatives.

Physical movement consistently demonstrated protective effects against psychological distress. Research identified that children who maintained physical exercise exhibited significantly fewer behavioral difficulties during lockdowns 611. Youth reported using various movement practices including structured exercise, outdoor activities, walking, and sports to regulate emotions, reduce somatic tension, and restore psychological equilibrium. Jamaican adolescents identified exercise as central to their coping formula: "I have exercised more, I have maintained a great attitude" 9. The **embodied self-regulation** achieved through physical activity modulates stress physiology by reducing cortisol levels, increasing endorphins, and restoring autonomic nervous system balance disrupted by chronic anxiety.

6 MALADAPTIVE COPING PATTERNS AND VULNERABILITY FACTORS

6.1 AVOIDANCE AND BEHAVIORAL ESCAPES

Avoidant coping strategies represent the most **psychologically detrimental** responses to pandemic stress. Longitudinal research identifies distinct profiles where youth preferring avoidance display heightened vulnerability to anxiety and depression 1. Avoidance manifests through behavioral withdrawal, cognitive suppression of distressing thoughts, and substance use. Homeless youth reported increased reliance on substances to manage pandemic-related stressors, reflecting limited access to adaptive alternatives 5. While providing temporary relief, avoidance strategies function as **maintenance mechanisms** for psychological disorders by preventing natural emotion processing and problem resolution.

Digital escapism presents a particularly concerning modern manifestation of avoidance. Chinese youth demonstrated dramatically increased internet dependency during the pandemic, with 60% reporting escalating usage compared to only 3% decreasing usage². This **compensatory immersion** in online worlds reflects attempts to escape pandemic realities but creates self-perpetuating cycles: excessive screen time correlates with heightened depression and anxiety, which in turn drives further digital avoidance. Researchers observe that emotion-oriented coping strategies (including digital escapism) consistently correlate with increased internalizing and externalizing symptoms across all age groups⁷. This pattern highlights the need for early identification of avoidant tendencies and provision of alternative regulation strategies.

6.2 TABLE: ADAPTIVE VS. MALADAPTIVE COPING STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

Coping Approach	Specific Mechanisms	Psychological Outcomes	Representative Findings
Proactive Engagement	Routine establishment, problem-solving	Reduced anxiety/depression, enhanced efficacy	Active copers reported better mental health ¹
Meaning-Focused	Cognitive reframing, values clarification	Increased purpose, reduced existential distress	"Changed habits to align with priorities" ⁹
Social Connection	Peer support, community participation	Buffered isolation, enhanced belonging	Volunteering reduced pandemic fixation ⁹
Creative Expression	Art, writing, music	Emotional processing, symbolic integration	"Drawing as distraction from distress" ⁹
Physical Regulation	Exercise, outdoor activities	Improved mood, reduced somatic symptoms	Fewer behavioral issues with consistent exercise ¹¹
Avoidance Strategies	Substance use, digital escapism	Exacerbated depression/anxiety, dependency	Increased internet addiction correlating with symptoms ²
Emotion-Oriented	Rumination, emotional outbursts	Heightened internalizing/externalizing issues	Linked to increased symptoms across ages ⁷

7 VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCE FACTORS

7.1 DEVELOPMENTAL AND IDENTITY CONSIDERATIONS

*Coping capacities demonstrate significant **age-dependent variations** reflecting cognitive, emotional, and social development. Preschoolers primarily rely on avoidant strategies—considered normative for their developmental stage—while school-aged children increasingly utilize problem-focused approaches with parental scaffolding 7. Adolescents demonstrate more sophisticated cognitive coping including positive reframing but simultaneously experience heightened vulnerability to social isolation impacts due to developmental priorities around peer relationships. This explains why adolescents report greater pandemic-related distress than younger children despite their expanded coping repertoire 4. The **developmental trajectory** of coping skills underscores the need for age-appropriate mental health interventions rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.*

***Gender identity** significantly influences coping patterns and mental health outcomes. Female adolescents report substantially higher anxiety levels than male peers and demonstrate greater pessimism about post-pandemic futures 79. This gender gap likely reflects complex interactions between biological vulnerability factors, socialization differences, and disproportionate pandemic-related burdens including increased domestic responsibilities. Transgender and non-binary youth face additional challenges, with one study finding 18% of homeless youth identifying as transgender or non-binary—a population experiencing unique discrimination and resource barriers 5. These findings highlight the necessity of **gender-responsive programming** that addresses differential experiences and needs.*

7.2 ENVIRONMENTAL AND SYSTEMIC INFLUENCES

***Family functioning** represents a critical moderating factor in youth coping capacity. Parental stress levels directly impact adolescent mental health, with financially insecure families experiencing cascading distress 6. Supportive family environments characterized by emotional validation, predictable routines, and balanced monitoring provide secure foundations for youth coping. Conversely, family conflict creates cumulative stress, particularly during lockdowns when escape from tense households proved impossible. Brazilian researchers documented increased violence against children and adolescents during pandemic restrictions, creating **toxic stress environments** that fundamentally undermine adaptive coping capacities 3. Such findings emphasize that family-centered interventions must complement individual youth support.*

***Institutional supports** significantly influence resilience trajectories. Educational settings serve as crucial mental health resources beyond their academic function, providing structure, socialization opportunities, and access to caring adults. Research confirms that in-person schooling protects against mental health deterioration, with children engaged in remote learning showing higher symptom levels 11. Schools also facilitate early identification of emerging mental health concerns through teacher observations. The loss of this surveillance during school closures resulted in undetected psychological distress progressing to severe impairment before professional*

intervention. Similarly, community organizations serving vulnerable youth faced operational disruptions precisely when their services were most needed. Rebuilding these **institutional scaffolds** remains essential for post-pandemic recovery.

8 RESEARCH INSIGHTS AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

8.1 QUALITATIVE NARRATIVES AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

Qualitative methodologies provide **rich phenomenological insights** into youth coping processes that standardized instruments might overlook. In-depth interviews with 33 Chinese youth revealed nuanced adaptations including shifts toward internet-based coping strategies during prolonged restrictions². These narratives capture the dynamic evolution of coping approaches as the pandemic progressed, revealing how initial crisis responses gradually transformed into more sustainable adjustment patterns. Such research illuminates the **meaning-making processes** through which youth integrate disruptive experiences into their personal development narratives.

Marginalized youth voices offer particularly valuable perspectives on resilience under adversity. Homeless young adults described complex intersections between pandemic stressors and pre-existing challenges: "COVID-19 as a stressor" layered atop "ongoing harms" including housing instability and resource scarcity⁵. Their narratives reveal creative survival strategies alongside emotional consequences often missed in mainstream mental health discourse. Researchers emphasize the importance of preserving these **counter-narratives** that challenge deficit-focused perspectives by highlighting agency and adaptation within structurally constrained circumstances. Capturing these experiences requires methodological approaches prioritizing relationship-building and cultural safety to overcome historical research exploitation.

8.2 QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENTS AND LONGITUDINAL TRACKING

Standardized psychological assessments provide **population-level insights** into coping effectiveness and mental health outcomes. Longitudinal tracking of 380 students across multiple measurement points identified five distinct coping profiles, with "positive thinking copers" experiencing significantly lower anxiety and depression alongside enhanced wellbeing¹. Such research demonstrates how coping style trajectories—not just baseline status—predict adjustment outcomes. Quantitative approaches also reveal clinically significant thresholds, such as studies identifying 22-30% of youth exceeding clinical cutoffs for depression or anxiety during peak pandemic periods⁶.

Mixed-methods designs offer particularly comprehensive understanding by integrating numerical data with contextual interpretation. A rapid review of 25 international studies established clear dichotomization between coping strategies yielding positive versus negative psychological outcomes⁴. This synthesis documented that proactive, solution-oriented approaches consistently reduced distress while avoidant, emotion-focused strategies exacerbated symptoms. These large-

scale analyses provide **evidence-based taxonomies** for categorizing coping effectiveness across diverse populations. However, researchers caution against overgeneralization, emphasizing that strategy effectiveness depends on contextual factors including stressor controllability, developmental stage, and cultural background.

9 IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

9.1 MULTI-LEVEL INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK

Effective youth mental health promotion requires **integrated intervention frameworks** addressing individual, institutional, and societal dimensions. At the individual level, evidence supports expanding access to coping skill development through school-based modules teaching emotion regulation, cognitive restructuring, and problem-solving. Mindfulness-based interventions show particular promise given their adaptability across developmental stages and minimal resource requirements 7. Costa Rican youth highlighted help-seeking as essential: "We do not all have the same possibilities... I didn't hesitate to ask for help" 9. Normalizing professional support through anti-stigma campaigns remains crucial for connecting vulnerable youth to care.

Institutional reforms should prioritize **educational system strengthening** based on research confirming schools' protective mental health function 11. Recommendations include training teachers in psychological first aid, implementing universal social-emotional learning curricula, and establishing school-based mental health clinics. Universities should expand counseling capacity while developing flexible attendance policies accommodating ongoing pandemic-related challenges. Community organizations require sustainable funding to deliver trauma-informed programming addressing specific populations including homeless, LGBTQ+, and disabled youth. Healthcare systems must integrate mental health screening into primary care while reducing barriers to behavioral health services through telehealth expansion and insurance reform.

9.2 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUITABLE RECOVERY

Equitable pandemic recovery demands **targeted policy interventions** addressing structural determinants of mental health. Economic support policies—including expanded child tax credits, housing assistance, and youth employment programs—alleviate the material deprivation exacerbating psychological distress. Regulatory frameworks should ensure digital equity through broadband access expansion and device provision programs, enabling marginalized youth to participate in virtual support services. Education policies must avoid standardized testing overemphasis instead focusing on holistic development and learning loss remediation through extended school years or tutoring supports.

Internationally, governments should heed UNICEF's call to "promote youth participation... increase investment, quality, and access to mental health services" based on regional assessments revealing significant unmet needs 9. Specific recommendations include allocating a minimum percentage of health budgets to youth mental health (ideally 10%), establishing national suicide prevention

strategies, and creating youth advisory councils informing policy development. Legislative action should enforce mental health parity in insurance coverage while expanding school counseling ratios beyond current unsustainable levels. These **structural interventions** address root causes rather than symptoms of the youth mental health crisis emerging from pandemic experiences.

10 CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an **unprecedented mental health challenge** for contemporary youth, disrupting normative development while accelerating pre-existing psychological vulnerabilities. This research synthesis reveals both concerning trends and promising adaptations, documenting how young people navigate post-pandemic adjustment through diverse coping mechanisms. Core findings indicate that **proactive, meaning-focused strategies**—including routine establishment, cognitive reframing, social connection, creative expression, and physical self-regulation—consistently correlate with positive outcomes. Conversely, avoidance patterns, particularly digital escapism and substance use, predict worsening psychological functioning.

Critical insights emerge regarding **differential vulnerability** across developmental stages, gender identities, and socioeconomic positions. Adolescents demonstrate heightened susceptibility to social isolation impacts, while female and gender-nonconforming youth report disproportionate distress. Marginalized populations including homeless, disabled, and economically disadvantaged youth face layered stressors requiring targeted intervention approaches. These findings collectively argue against homogeneous support models in favor of **precision mental health approaches** responsive to intersectional identities and lived experiences.

The path forward requires **multi-systemic commitment** to youth mental health as a societal priority rather than individual responsibility. Evidence-based recommendations include integrating coping skills training into educational curricula, expanding accessible mental health services through digital and community platforms, addressing structural inequities through economic support policies, and empowering youth leadership in recovery planning. As Brazilian youth João reflected: "Self-awareness helps me a lot" 9. Combining such personal insight with robust environmental supports offers the optimal foundation for post-pandemic resilience. Future research should longitudinally track coping evolution beyond immediate recovery phases while identifying optimal implementation strategies for evidence-based interventions across diverse global contexts.

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