

## The Experience of Psychosomatic Disorders among Adolescents: Challenges and Coping Strategies

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### Article Info

#### Article type:

Original Research

#### How to cite this article:

Bulut, S., Bukhori, B., & Bhat, R.H. (2024). The Experience of Psychosomatic Disorders Among Adolescents: Challenges and Coping Strategies. *Journal of Personality and Psychosomatic Research*, 2(2), 19-25.

<https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jprr.2.2.4>



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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the experiences of adolescents with psychosomatic disorders, focusing on the challenges they encounter and the coping strategies they employ. The objective is to illuminate the psychosomatic phenomenon among adolescents and identify potential areas for intervention and support. Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 35 adolescents diagnosed with psychosomatic disorders. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences. The interviews aimed at reaching theoretical saturation were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns. The analysis revealed two main themes: "Challenges" and "Coping Strategies." Under "Challenges," six categories were identified: Stigma and Isolation, Misunderstanding by Peers, Academic Pressure, Emotional Distress, Physical Symptoms, and Communication Barriers. The "Coping Strategies" theme encompassed eight categories: Seeking Professional Help, Social Support, Personal Coping Mechanisms, Educational Adjustments, Advocacy and Awareness, Developing Self-Understanding, Resource Utilization, and Building a Supportive Environment. These findings highlight the complexity of the psychosomatic experience among adolescents, showcasing the breadth of challenges faced and the diversity of strategies employed to cope. Adolescents with psychosomatic disorders face a range of significant challenges that impact their mental and physical health, as well as their social and academic life. Despite these obstacles, they employ a variety of coping strategies to manage their symptoms and navigate their daily lives. This study underscores the importance of holistic support systems and tailored interventions to address the unique needs of this population. Future research should focus on developing targeted support mechanisms that leverage the identified coping strategies to enhance the well-being of adolescents with psychosomatic disorders.

**Keywords:** *Adolescents, Psychosomatic Disorders, Coping Strategies, Challenges, Qualitative Research, Thematic Analysis.*

## 1. Introduction

Psychosomatic disorders, as described in the medical literature, encompass a range of physical illnesses that are either exacerbated or primarily caused by mental factors such as stress, anxiety, and depression. These conditions can manifest through various physical symptoms, including but not limited to, chronic pain, gastrointestinal issues, and fatigue, which do not have a clear medical diagnosis (Giannotta et al., 2022; Habukawa et al., 2022). The prevalence of such disorders among adolescents has been on the rise, a trend that underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the underlying causes, as well as effective strategies for intervention and support.

The impact of psychosomatic disorders extends beyond the immediate physical symptoms, affecting adolescents' emotional well-being, academic achievement, and social interactions. Stigmatization, isolation, and misunderstanding by peers and adults further compound these challenges, often leading to a cyclical pattern of stress and symptom exacerbation (Cattelino et al., 2021; Cavioni et al., 2021). Moreover, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these experiences, disrupting normal life and limiting access to traditional support systems, thereby placing additional mental health burdens on this vulnerable population (Foster et al., 2022; Theberath et al., 2022).

Adolescents' coping strategies in the face of these psychosomatic challenges are diverse, ranging from seeking professional help to relying on personal and social support systems. These strategies are crucial for managing symptoms, improving mental health outcomes, and enhancing overall well-being. Research has highlighted the significance of positive coping mechanisms, such as social support and personal resilience, in mitigating the impact of stress and promoting mental health among adolescents facing various adversities (Ismail et al., 2021; Parcesepe et al., 2023).

The family environment plays a pivotal role in shaping adolescents' coping strategies and responses to stress. Studies suggest that supportive family dynamics and effective communication can significantly buffer against the development of psychosomatic symptoms and contribute to healthier stress management practices (Masuda et al., 2007; Subekti et al., 2021). Conversely, adverse childhood experiences, including familial conflict and instability, have been linked to an increased risk of psychosomatic disorders and mental health challenges later in life (Masuda et al., 2007).

Socioeconomic factors also influence the prevalence and management of psychosomatic disorders among adolescents. Research has demonstrated a clear link between socioeconomic status and mental health outcomes, with lower socioeconomic status associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms (Varga et al., 2014). These findings underscore the importance of addressing socioeconomic disparities as part of comprehensive mental health strategies for adolescents.

The educational setting is another critical context for understanding and addressing psychosomatic disorders in adolescents. Schools play a vital role in early identification and intervention, offering a unique opportunity to support affected individuals through tailored educational adjustments and access to mental health resources (Cavioni et al., 2021). Furthermore, the school environment can either exacerbate or alleviate stressors, highlighting the need for school-based mental health programs that promote resilience, well-being, and healthy coping strategies.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the urgency of addressing mental health challenges among adolescents. The widespread disruptions caused by the pandemic, including school closures, social isolation, and increased family stress, have led to significant increases in stress, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms among this population (Foster et al., 2022; Muth et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the need for adaptive coping strategies and mental health interventions that are responsive to the changing landscape of stressors affecting adolescents.

In light of these complexities, the current study aims to delve into the experiences of psychosomatic disorders among adolescents, with a focus on understanding the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. By exploring these dimensions, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the body of knowledge on adolescent mental health, offering implications for practitioners, policymakers, and educators in developing targeted interventions to support this vulnerable population effectively.

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of psychosomatic disorders among adolescents, identifying the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. Given the exploratory nature of our research, we employed a phenomenological approach to deeply understand the

subjective experiences of adolescents dealing with psychosomatic disorders.

Participants were adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years, who self-reported or were medically diagnosed with psychosomatic disorders. Purposive sampling was used to select individuals representing a broad spectrum of psychosomatic experiences. Inclusion criteria ensured participants were cognitively able to participate in an interview and had experienced symptoms within the last six months. Efforts were made to ensure diversity in demographics such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background.

Theoretical saturation was achieved after conducting interviews with a predetermined number of participants, as new interviews ceased to provide additional insights. This saturation point guided the decision to conclude data collection, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research topic without unnecessary data redundancy.

Participants and their guardians (for participants under 18) were provided with a study information sheet detailing the study’s purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians (when applicable) prior to the interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study, with all data anonymized and securely stored.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for the exploration of personal experiences while providing the flexibility to probe deeper into specific areas of interest. Each interview was conducted by the same researcher to maintain consistency, lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, and carried out in a secure and private setting to ensure confidentiality and comfort for the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later

transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore the participants’ experiences with psychosomatic disorders, their perceived challenges, and coping strategies. Questions were pre-tested in a pilot interview to ensure clarity and relevance.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The process involved reading and re-reading the data to become familiar with its depth and breadth, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally producing the report. NVivo software was utilized to facilitate the organization and analysis of the data. Rigor was ensured through methods such as peer debriefing, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 35 participants. The demographic composition of our sample was diverse, aiming to capture a wide range of experiences across different backgrounds. Moreover, 20 identified as female and 15 as male. The age distribution was equally comprehensive, with participants ranging from 12 to 18 years old: 6 were aged 12-13, 11 were aged 14-15, and 18 were aged 16-18, indicating a higher representation of older adolescents. Regarding educational level, the sample included 10 participants in middle school, 22 in high school, and 3 in alternative education programs, suggesting a broad spectrum of academic environments. The participants hailed from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, with 12 reporting low, 15 middle, and 8 high socioeconomic status, based on parental occupation and household income.

**Table 1**

Challenges

Main Theme	Subtheme	Concepts (Open Codes)
Challenges	Stigma and Isolation	Fear of judgment, social withdrawal, hiding symptoms, loneliness
	Misunderstanding by Peers	Peer rejection, lack of empathy, bullying, misinformation
	Academic Pressure	School absenteeism, concentration difficulties, falling grades, test anxiety
	Emotional Distress	Anxiety, depression, hopelessness, mood swings
	Physical Symptoms	Chronic fatigue, pain without clear cause, gastrointestinal issues, headache
	Communication Barriers	Difficulty explaining symptoms, lack of support from adults, being misunderstood

Our thematic analysis identified six primary challenges impacting adolescents with psychosomatic disorders: stigma and isolation, misunderstanding by peers, academic pressure, emotional distress, physical symptoms, and communication barriers.

**Stigma and Isolation:** Participants frequently described feeling judged and isolated due to their conditions. One adolescent remarked, "It's like you're carrying a label that everyone can see, but no one understands. You end up feeling so alone." This subtheme captures the loneliness and separation from peers that participants experienced.

**Misunderstanding by Peers:** Many adolescents highlighted a lack of empathy and understanding from their peers. "They think I'm making it up or exaggerating... It's really hard when your friends just don't get it," shared another participant. This theme underscores the social challenges and misinformation adolescents face.

**Academic Pressure:** The struggle to balance academic responsibilities with health issues was a significant challenge. "I've missed so much school; I'm constantly stressed about exams and falling behind," one adolescent

expressed. This reflects the pervasive anxiety and stress related to schooling.

**Emotional Distress:** Participants frequently mentioned feelings of anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. "Some days, it's like a shadow that follows you, no matter how hard you try to shake it off," described a participant, illustrating the mental health struggles intertwined with psychosomatic symptoms.

**Physical Symptoms:** Chronic fatigue, unexplained pain, and gastrointestinal issues were commonly reported. "It's exhausting having to deal with pain that doesn't seem to have a source. It affects everything you do," a participant explained, highlighting the pervasive impact of physical symptoms.

**Communication Barriers:** Adolescents reported difficulties in articulating their experiences to adults. "Trying to explain what you're feeling to someone who doesn't understand is so frustrating," mentioned one adolescent, emphasizing the gap in communication and understanding between them and adults.

**Table 2**

*Coping Strategies*

Main Theme	Subtheme	Concepts (Open Codes)
Coping Strategies	Seeking Professional Help	Therapy, medication, regular check-ups, specialized care
	Social Support	Peer support groups, family support, online communities, mentorship
	Personal Coping Mechanisms	Mindfulness, exercise, hobbies, journaling, relaxation techniques
	Educational Adjustments	Special accommodations, tutoring, reduced workload, flexible scheduling
	Advocacy and Awareness	Participating in campaigns, educating peers, social media use, advocacy work
	Developing Self-Understanding	Self-reflection, recognizing triggers, setting boundaries, emotional regulation
	Resource Utilization	Utilizing school counselors, accessing community health resources, online resources, hotlines
	Building a Supportive Environment	Creating a safe space at home, seeking understanding peers, teacher support

Eight coping strategies emerged from the interviews: seeking professional help, social support, personal coping mechanisms, educational adjustments, advocacy and awareness, developing self-understanding, resource utilization, and building a supportive environment.

**Seeking Professional Help:** Accessing therapy and medication were crucial for many. "Starting therapy was a turning point for me. It's one place I feel completely understood," one participant noted, indicating the value of professional mental health support.

**Social Support:** The role of peer support groups and family was pivotal. "My family and friends who get it make a huge difference. Just knowing they're there helps a lot," another adolescent shared, emphasizing the importance of a supportive social network.

**Personal Coping Mechanisms:** Techniques such as mindfulness, exercise, and hobbies were frequently mentioned. "When I'm painting, I forget about everything else. It's my escape," described a participant, showcasing the therapeutic value of personal hobbies.

**Educational Adjustments:** Participants benefited from special accommodations and tutoring. "Having extra time on tests really eases the pressure. It's one less thing to worry about," an adolescent remarked, highlighting the importance of educational support.

**Advocacy and Awareness:** Engaging in advocacy work was empowering for some. "By sharing my story, I hope to make a difference for others like me," a participant expressed, demonstrating the power of advocacy in fostering change.

**Developing Self-Understanding:** Many adolescents spoke about the importance of recognizing triggers and setting boundaries. "Understanding my limits has been key. It helps me manage better," shared another, underscoring the value of self-awareness.

**Resource Utilization:** Utilizing available resources, such as school counselors and online materials, was critical. "The resources my counselor gave me have been incredibly helpful," mentioned a participant, indicating the utility of accessible support.

**Building a Supportive Environment:** Creating a safe and understanding space was essential. "My teachers and friends who understand make school much easier to navigate," an adolescent explained, reflecting on the significance of a supportive network.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study explores the experiences of psychosomatic disorders among adolescents, focusing on the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ. Our findings reveal significant insights into the complexities of psychosomatic symptoms in adolescence, underscoring the importance of early intervention, supportive environments, and effective coping mechanisms. These results are discussed in the context of existing literature, providing a comprehensive understanding of adolescent psychosomatic disorders and offering directions for future research and practice.

In the exploration of the experiences of adolescents with psychosomatic disorders, the qualitative analysis revealed two main themes: "Challenges" and "Coping Strategies." Each theme encapsulated a series of categories that provided a nuanced understanding of the adolescents' experiences. Under "Challenges," six categories were identified: Stigma and Isolation, Misunderstanding by Peers, Academic Pressure, Emotional Distress, Physical Symptoms, and Communication Barriers. For "Coping Strategies," eight categories emerged: Seeking Professional Help, Social Support, Personal Coping Mechanisms, Educational Adjustments, Advocacy and Awareness, Developing Self-Understanding, Resource Utilization, and Building a Supportive Environment. These categories collectively offered a comprehensive view of the complex landscape that adolescents navigate when dealing with psychosomatic disorders.

The "Challenges" theme highlighted the multifaceted obstacles adolescents with psychosomatic disorders face.

Stigma and Isolation were underscored by feelings of judgment, social withdrawal, and loneliness. Misunderstanding by Peers was characterized by peer rejection, lack of empathy, and misinformation. Academic Pressure included school absenteeism, concentration difficulties, and falling grades. Emotional Distress encompassed anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and mood swings. Physical Symptoms were described through chronic fatigue, unexplained pain, gastrointestinal issues, and headaches. Lastly, Communication Barriers involved difficulties in explaining symptoms to adults, lack of adult support, and being misunderstood.

Under the "Coping Strategies" theme, various approaches employed by adolescents to manage their psychosomatic conditions were delineated. Seeking Professional Help involved therapy, medication, and specialized care. Social Support was characterized by peer support groups, family support, and online communities. Personal Coping Mechanisms included mindfulness, exercise, hobbies, and journaling. Educational Adjustments referred to special accommodations, tutoring, and reduced workloads. Advocacy and Awareness covered campaign participation, educating peers, and social media advocacy. Developing Self-Understanding involved self-reflection, recognizing triggers, and emotional regulation. Resource Utilization included utilizing school counselors, community health resources, and hotlines. Finally, Building a Supportive Environment entailed creating a safe space at home, seeking understanding from peers, and teacher support. These categories reflect the diverse and proactive strategies adolescents adopt to navigate the challenges posed by their psychosomatic disorders.

Our analysis identified several challenges faced by adolescents with psychosomatic disorders, including stigma, isolation, misunderstanding by peers, academic pressures, emotional distress, and physical symptoms. These challenges align with previous findings by Cattellino et al. (2021), who emphasized the detrimental impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on adolescents' self-efficacy, subjective well-being, and coping (Cattellino et al., 2021). Similarly, Cavioni et al. (2021) highlighted the crucial role of life satisfaction in mediating adolescents' mental health at school, suggesting that satisfaction in life facets could buffer against the stress associated with academic pressures (Cavioni et al., 2021).

Consistent with Foster et al. (2022), our study underscores the heightened stress and reliance on various coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their



longitudinal analysis of Swiss adolescents revealed an intricate relationship between perceived stress, coping mechanisms, and mental health status, affirming the dynamic nature of coping strategies in response to external stressors.

The coping strategies identified in our study, including seeking professional help, social support, personal coping mechanisms, and educational adjustments, resonate with the findings of Giannotta et al. (2022) and Habukawa et al. (2022). These studies advocate for early intervention and the importance of supportive environments in mitigating the psychosomatic symptoms of adolescents (Giannotta et al., 2022; Habukawa et al., 2022). Our findings further highlight the significance of coping strategies in managing psychosomatic disorders, as evidenced by Ismail et al. (2021), who explored the mediating role of drug hazard knowledge in the relationship between coping strategies and substance use disorders (Ismail et al., 2021).

The influence of familial and socioeconomic factors on the development and management of psychosomatic disorders cannot be overstated. Masuda et al. (2007) provide a poignant reminder of the lasting impact of adverse childhood experiences, both within and outside the family context, on the emergence of psychosomatic disorders (Masuda et al., 2007). This aligns with our findings, which underscore the critical role of family support and socioeconomic status in shaping adolescents' coping strategies, as also noted by Varga et al. (2014) in their study on socioeconomic inequalities and mental well-being (Varga et al., 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic has indelibly marked the mental health landscape for adolescents, exacerbating existing challenges and introducing new stressors. Our findings echo those of Theberath et al. (2022), who systematically reviewed the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents. The necessity for adaptive coping strategies in the face of unprecedented stressors is a common theme, further emphasizing the need for resilience and flexibility in coping mechanisms.

The relationship between coping strategies and substance use, as explored by Subekti et al. (2021), highlights the complex interplay between stress adaptation and substance misuse among adolescents (Subekti et al., 2021). Our study extends this discussion by illustrating how effective coping strategies can mitigate the risk of substance use as a maladaptive response to psychosomatic symptoms. Furthermore, Zanjani et al. (2021) underscore the effectiveness of psychological interventions in enhancing

well-being among adolescents, reinforcing the value of targeted interventions in supporting adolescents with psychosomatic disorders (Zanjani et al., 2021).

The study, while informative, is not without its limitations. The reliance on self-reported data and semi-structured interviews may introduce bias and limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the sample size and diversity may not fully capture the breadth of experiences among adolescents with psychosomatic disorders across different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. These limitations underscore the need for caution in interpreting the results and suggest the value of further research to corroborate and expand upon these findings.

Future research should aim to address the limitations of the current study by employing larger, more diverse samples and incorporating a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the findings. Studies exploring the long-term outcomes of psychosomatic disorders in adolescence and the effectiveness of specific interventions would be particularly valuable. Moreover, research focusing on the role of digital technologies and online support systems in providing accessible mental health resources for adolescents could offer insights into innovative approaches to care.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice, suggesting the need for holistic, multidisciplinary approaches to support adolescents with psychosomatic disorders. Schools, healthcare providers, and families should collaborate to create supportive, understanding environments that foster open communication and access to mental health resources. Interventions should be tailored to address the specific challenges and coping mechanisms identified in this research, emphasizing the development of resilience and self-efficacy among adolescents. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of early identification and intervention, advocating for integrated mental health education within schools to promote awareness and understanding of psychosomatic disorders among students and educators alike.

In summary, this research provides a comprehensive overview of the struggles faced by adolescents with psychosomatic disorders and the resilience they exhibit in coping with these challenges. It highlights the critical need for supportive interventions and environments that acknowledge and address the unique needs of this vulnerable population. By shedding light on these issues, the study

contributes to a deeper understanding of psychosomatic disorders in adolescence, paving the way for more effective support mechanisms and interventions designed to enhance the well-being of affected individuals.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

### Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

### Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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