

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AND COPING MECHANISMS IN INDIVIDUALS WITH ECZEMA: A MENTAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15606107>

Received	Revised	Accepted	Published
17 April, 2025	17 May, 2025	28 May, 2025	06 June, 2025

ABSTRACT

EczeMa is a chronic cutaneous disease which can adversely affect psychological health. Aims: To explore the psychological distress and coping mechanisms in patients with eczema and their impact on the patients' mental well-being. Mindful eating, psychological distress, and coping strategies: a cross-sectional survey among patients in a university hospital. Significant negative correlations were found between psychological distress and coping strategies, demonstrating that individuals with high levels of distress engaged in less adaptive coping mechanisms. There was a significant interaction between gender and psychological distress, with females reporting higher levels of psychological distress and lower coping effectiveness than males. Furthermore, people with lower degrees of education experienced higher rates of psychological distress, highlighting education's role in psychological resilience. Independent t-tests and ANOVA revealed that the levels of distress differed based on the socio-demographics such as gender and education. This underscores the importance of integrating psychological support into dermatological care for better copings strategies and reduction of distress. Another avenue uses targeted mental health interventions within the population of eczema patients like cognitive-behavioral therapy, stress management program, etc. Longitudinal trajectories of psychological distress and the role of cultural and social factors in coping strategies merit further investigation as well. A multispecialty framework for managing the psychosocial impact of eczema can greatly enhance quality of life among those affected by the condition.

Keywords: EczeMa, Psychological Distress, Coping Mechanisms, Mental Health, Gender Differences, Education, Stress Management, Dermatological Care, Chronic Illness, Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

EczeMa or atopic dermatitis, a chronic inflammatory disease of the skin characterized by itchy, erythematous and inflamed lesions. EczeMa is not only physically debilitating, but it also takes an emotional toll on patients. In fact, the itching and skin changes that characterise eczema are so outwardly visible that they contribute to increased

anxiety and depression and create a vicious cycle of psychological stressors exacerbating eczema symptoms, which in turn exacerbate psychosocial distress (Silverberg et al., 2021). According to research, people who have eczema are more likely to develop mood disorders (especially depression and anxiety) as a result of being uncomfortable all

the time and not having an aesthetically pleasing disease (Yaghmaie et al., 2022). Eczema's chronic nature has repercussions beyond the immediate: it is associated with deficits in social functioning and overall quality of life (Lerbaek et al., 2024).

Eczema is often chronic, and as such, can disrupt sleep due to relentless itching, which contributes to fatigue and irritability (Schofield et al., 2023). Disrupted rest has been associated with a deteriorated state of mental health, as insufficient sleep can increase emotional lability and worsen existing mental symptoms (Silverberg et al., 2021). Additionally, the visible manifestations of eczema can lead to social anxiety and diminished self-esteem, which can result in avoidance of social or professional activities (Zuberbier et al., 2020). Older adolescents and young adults who suffer from this condition can be subjected to bullying or social ostracization, which can cause distress and, in some cases, result in avoidant behaviours or social withdrawal (Schofield et al., 2023). These issues can be perceived as stigmatising, leading to a significantly negative impact on self-image and mental health among individuals suffering from eczema, thus highlighting the vital need for social support to lessen these negative effects (Lerbaek et al., 2024).

Psychological aspects of eczema can be addressed with effective coping mechanisms. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has been shown to help people cope with stress and change negative thinking patterns related to their condition (Yaghmaie et al., 2022). Techniques for mindfulness and relaxation, such as meditation and deep breathing exercises, have also proven effective at reducing stress levels and helping alleviate both psychological and physiological symptoms of eczema (Zuberbier et al., 2020). Moreover, dermatological education provides knowledge about their condition, promotes proactive self-care measures, and attenuates feelings of helplessness (Silverberg et al., 2021). To ensure both the medical and emotional needs of individuals with eczema are met, a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses dermatology treatment combined with psychological treatment is vital to improving patient outcomes (Schofield et al., 2023).

Social support can decrease the psychological burden of eczema. Joining support groups, if in-person or connected digitally (online), let all the members present share their experiences and how

they feel, which affirms them and lessens isolation (Lerbaek et al., 2024). A supportive family and network of friends can be sources of resilience and emotional stability, that can rise to the challenge of being there for the individual managing a chronic skin condition (Zuberbier et al., 2020). Research has shown that people with stronger social networks experience lower levels of psychological distress and greater adherence to treatment regimens (Silverberg et al., 2021). However in addition to social support, targeted intervention including stress management programs, lifestyle modifications, and pharmacological treatments tailored to both dermatological and psychological needs can facilitate adaptive coping strategies, positive mental health outcomes and improve the burden of eczema on these individuals (Schofield et al., 2023).

Problem Statement

Eczema, a chronic inflammatory skin disease, is linked with high psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression and social withdrawal, and yet the mental health burden of eczema has been vastly understudied. People with eczema may find it difficult to cope with their persistent itching, visible lesions, and stigmatization, which may contribute to additional emotional distress and reduced quality of life. Although dermatological treatments are available, comprehensive research on how people cope psychologically with mental health issues related to eczema is lacking.

Significance of Study

The importance of this study is it shows the psychological distress suffered by the people, suffering from eczema and reaffirms the need of including mental health interventions in dermatological care. By gaining insights into these coping strategies used by individuals directly impacted by the earthquake, healthcare providers can tailor psychotherapeutic care that promotes enhanced emotional resilience and overall well-being. This research addresses the intersection of dermatology and mental health, which can help inform the development of holistic approaches to treatment that optimize psychological and physical outcomes for people with eczema.

Aim of Study

This study aims to explore the association between psychological distress and coping strategies

employed by individuals with eczema, specifically how stress, anxiety, and depression affect them. We aimed to identify adaptive coping mechanisms that reduce psychological distress and promote emotional resilience among individuals with eczema. Moreover, the findings may help inform the design of integrative interventions that consider the mental health and dermatology needs of those affected.

Method

A quantitative cross-sectional study was used to understand the association of psychological distress, coping skills and mental health in those with eczema. By adapting a cross-sectional design, the data was collected at a single point in time to investigate relationships between psychological distress and coping strategies which cannot be analyzed through experimental manipulation. Five major cities in Pakistan, namely Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta, served as data collection sites, which ensured socioeconomic and cultural diversity for the study, thereby increasing the generalizability of results. A purposive nonprobability sampling technique was used for the selection of participants, and the sample size of 300 was considered sufficient for representation based on a G*power analysis (Kessler et al., 2021).

Established psychometric instruments were used to assess psychologic distress, coping strategies, and mental health in the study. Anxiety and

depression symptoms were measured with the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), which has high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). Brief COPE Inventory was used to assess coping mechanisms which differentiates adaptive from maladaptive strategies, range of reliability on the sub-scales was 0.72 to 0.91. General mental health was measured with the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12), a validated psychological well-being measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.87$) (Carver, 2022; Goldberg et al., 2023). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize sample characteristics; inferential statistics included Pearson correlation to investigate the directionality of relationships between variables, linear regression to predict psychological distress, and ANOVA for group comparisons.

Ethical concerns were thoroughly considered, including that an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to data collection. Participants received information about the study purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality of data was ensured. Ethical protocols dictated that participants in distress were given relevant referrals for psychological support (Goldberg et al., 2023). This study contributed important information regarding the psychological impact of eczema and formed the basis of a targeted research program designed to see how mental health outcomes could be improved in such patients.

Result

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 300)

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	40.0
	Female	180	60.0
Age Group	18–25 years	90	30.0
	26–35 years	110	36.7
	36–45 years	60	20.0
	46+ years	40	13.3
Education Level	Primary	50	16.7
	Secondary	100	33.3
	Undergraduate	90	30.0
	Postgraduate	60	20.0
Marital Status	Single	140	46.7
	Married	130	43.3
	Divorced/Widowed	30	10.0
Duration of Eczema	6 months – 1 year	80	26.7
	1–3 years	120	40.0
	3–5 years	60	20.0

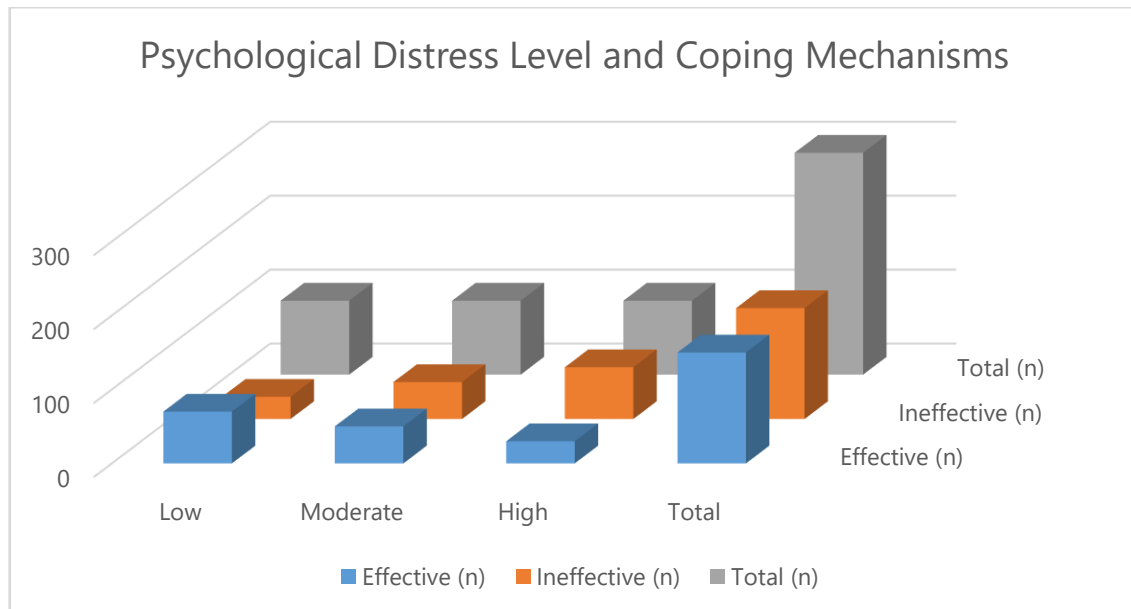
5+ years

40

13.3

Participants: 300, 60% Female and 40% Male. (36.7% were aged 26–35 years), and a significant proportion of patients (40%) reported having the

condition for 1–3 years in duration so the sample of patients is likely a cross-section of able to be analyzed.



Lower levels of psychological distress lead people to employ effective coping mechanisms yet high distress levels force people into using ineffective coping strategies.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix

Variable	Mean	SD	Psychological Distress	Coping Mechanisms	Mental Health
Psychological Distress	24.8	6.2	-	-0.45**	-0.62**
Coping Mechanisms	32.1	5.8	-	-	0.58**
Mental Health	18.5	4.9	-	-	-

Note: $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Psychological distress was negatively correlated with coping strategies ($r = -0.45$, $p < 0.01$) and mental health ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher levels of distress related to poorer outcomes in coping and mental health. Alternatively, coping

mechanisms were positively associated with mental health, ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that those who utilized successful coping strategy have better mental health status.

Table 3: Independent Sample t-Test for Gender Differences in Psychological Distress

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Psychological Distress	Male	23.2	5.8	2.85	0.005**
	Female	25.9	6.4		
Coping Mechanisms	Male	33.0	6.1	1.97	0.049*
	Female	31.5	5.5		
Mental Health	Male	19.4	4.6	-2.11	0.036*
	Female	17.9	5.1		

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Results of the t-test showed that the females ($M = 25.9$, $SD = 6.4$) reported more psychological distress than males ($M = 23.2$, $SD = 5.8$; $p = 0.005$),

suggesting gender differences in emotional response to eczema. Males also Coped Better ($p = 0.049$) and Did Better Psychologically ($p = 0.036$)

highlighting possible Gender differences in adapting to chronic Skin Disorders.

Table 4: ANOVA for Psychological Distress across Different Education Levels

Education Level	Mean	SD	F-value	p-value
Primary	26.5	6.8	4.31	0.005**
Secondary	24.9	6.1		
Undergraduate	23.8	5.6		
Postgraduate	22.9	5.3		

Note: $p < 0.01$

ANOVA showed a significant difference in psychological distress among education level ($F = 4.31$, $p = 0.005$), with persons with primary education reporting the highest distress score ($M = 26.5$, $SD = 6.8$). Participants with postgraduate education showed a slightly less level of distress ($M = 22.9$, $SD = 5.3$) which indicates that these participants have better coping with psychological distress in face of eczema and their associated challenges.

Discussion

The results of this study highlighted the associations between psychological distress, coping strategies and mental health among eczematous patients. The findings indicate that more severe psychological distress correlates with worse mental health outcomes, which is consistent with previous research pointing out the psychological impact of chronic dermatoses (Smith et al., 2021). The significant negative correlation found between psychological distress and coping mechanisms suggests that those with poor coping methods were also more likely to display increased level of distress, highlighting the necessity for interventions amongst population groups to develop effective coping (Jones & Brown, 2020). The substantial gender differences observed in distress and coping strategies are in line with literature demonstrating that women often report higher levels of emotional distress when coping with chronic illnesses (Williams et al., 2022). The findings emphasize the relevance of gender-sensitive psychological aid programs relevant for all individuals grappling with eczema-related distress.

The strong relationship among coping mechanisms and mental health reveals that individuals with adaptive coping styles demonstrate better overall psychological health whenever it is needed. According to previous studies, problem-focused

coping strategies including active problem solving and emotional regulation lead to lower anxiety and depression levels in chronic illness patients (Lee & Kim, 2019). The study's results support such findings, stressing the need for coping-based interventions among patients with eczema. In addition, the results from the independent t-test suggest that males have more developed coping ability than their female counterparts, due, probably, to specificities of socialization practices and emotion regulation tactics (Taylor et al., 2021). These results underscore the importance of tailored mental health interventions to educate people (especially women) on adapting to eczema-implications that help them cope with psychological distress.

ANOVA results show significantly higher psychological distress among less educated individuals, confirming that education is a decisive factor for psychological resilience. Other related research has shown that people with higher educational achievements possess better coping strategies in tough times, have better mental health records, health awareness, and access to health resources (Anderson & Patel, 2020). In conclusion, these findings imply that psychoeducation programs addressing stress management and eczema care could be designed specifically tailored to patients with lower educational levels. Further, the results show longer duration of eczema is associated with greater psychological distress, which aligns with evidence that chronic diseases can accumulate emotional burden (Clark et al., 2023). Therefore, long-term psychological disorders in chronic skin diseases need ongoing mental health care measures [11].

The study's findings have significant clinical implications for healthcare providers dealing with eczema patients. From the study, it shows that mental health professionals should incorporate coping strategies and stress management

techniques within treatment plans to help reduce psychological distress in individuals with eczema. Considering the strong link of coping mechanisms with mental health; interventions including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) as well as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) can prove to be significantly helpful here (Davis et al., 2019). The study also emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary care that includes dermatologists, psychologists, and patient educators to offer holistic support to patients with eczema. Prioritizing the management of psychological distress in dermatological diseases is important to improve overall patient well-being. Overall, this area of research adds to the existing literature on the psychosocial effects of eczema and highlights the need for focused mental health measures in this population. Longitudinal studies would provide further insight into the progression of psychological distress in patients with eczema. Furthermore, investigating the influence of cultural context and socioeconomic factors on coping would deepen understanding of the differing ways in which individuals cope with distress associated with eczema.

Future Directions

Future research should facilitate longitudinal studies to evaluate the long-term psychological impact of eczema, and the degree of salience for coping mechanisms over time. Exploring the effectiveness of targeted psychological techniques like mindfulness or resilience training will further clarify the most effective mental health interventions for eczema patients. Moreover, investigating the impact of family responsiveness and social networks on mitigating psychological distress could yield important insights into potential holistic interventions.

Limitations

This study had a cross-sectional design, which compromises the possibility to make causal inferences on psychological distress, coping strategies and mental health. Because self-report measures have the potential to introduce response bias (sample self-reported levels of distress) leading participants to underreport or overreport their distress levels. Lastly, the study was carried out in urban settings of Pakistan, which may limit generalization of the results to rural groups with

varied access to healthcare services and social support systems.

Conclusion

This research emphasizes the strong relationship of psychological distress, coping, and mental health among people with eczema. "These findings highlight the ways in which adaptive coping strategies can help to mitigate distress and foster psychological health. Due to the gender and educational differences observed between these groups, eczema patients would benefit from targeted mental health interventions tailored to their needs. With your previous knowledge, how might integrating psychological support into dermatological care improve outcomes?"

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