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“Gender Differences in Coping Mechanisms for Anxiety”

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Abstract:-

Anxiety is a feeling that everyone can experience at various points throughout life, yet when anxiety becomes excessive, it can lead to overwhelming feelings of fear or worry in individuals. It is important to recognize that men and women often cope with anxiety in markedly different ways, with research indicating that women typically employ emotion-focused coping strategies, while men more frequently opt for problem-focused coping methods. These differences can be traced back to traditional gender roles, which play a significant role in determining the strategies individuals adopt when confronting anxiety. When people experience anxiety, they often seek support from their social networks, and this support-seeking behavior is influenced by the socially acceptable ways defined by their respective gender roles. Social role theory provides further insights into these gender-based differences in coping strategies and highlights how various cultures and social environments assign distinct roles and responsibilities to both men and women. Such roles profoundly impact individuals' self-perception, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and expectations in a range of situations. For instance, anxious women who seek emotional support are often perceived as embodying maturity or fulfilling their traditionally ascribed role, while anxious men may be interpreted as fearful, overly dependent, or in need of protection, which directly contradicts societal expectations associated with masculinity. As a result, women's tendency to engage in emotion-focused coping often reflects a perception of personal growth and emotional maturity. In contrast, men's inclination toward problem-focused coping tends to align with their need to confront anxiety head-on, thus demonstrating their strength and capability to manage difficult emotions. This distinction in coping styles underscores the complex interplay between gender roles and the experience of anxiety, highlighting the necessity for a deeper understanding of these dynamics in both psychological research and therapeutic practices.

Keywords: Anxiety, psychological, mechanism, dynamics, etc.

1. Introduction

Anxiety is a commonly encountered emotion that can affect anyone, and individuals from all demographics encounter anxiety at various points in their lives. In a broader sense, anxiety is described as an adaptive mechanism that can provide valuable information regarding an individual's capacity to handle an impending situation. However, it can become maladaptive when expressed in disproportion to the actual severity of the trigger, which may undermine both the individual's and outsiders' behavioural efficiency. The strategies employed to address anxiety and its overall impact on an individual can significantly depend on their personality traits and the nature of the specific trigger they face. As a result, the manner in which the anxiety is managed, along with its consequences, can vary markedly between different genders. The coping mechanisms and styles utilized to address anxiety can differ greatly, often being classified as either problem-focused or more inclined towards emotion-focused coping strategies. This variation in coping mechanisms is primarily linked to the perceived roles and expectations that an individual has in relation to their specific society and culture; that is, the responsibilities and social norms individuals are taught to recognize, both for themselves and for others around them. Generally speaking, research indicates that women are more likely to employ coping styles that specifically target emotional responses to anxiety, essentially aiming to understand and express their feelings. In contrast, men are found to be more inclined towards coping styles that focus on resolving the root cause of the anxiety, opting to tackle problems head-on. This fundamental difference in coping styles inevitably leads to a stark contrast in the psychological and behavioural patterns observed in both genders, which reflects the influence of biological predispositions and the broader social role theory that shapes their responses to anxiety. Understanding these dynamics can contribute to better approaches in supporting individuals as they navigate their anxiety.

2. Theoretical Background

Coping mechanisms are conceptualized as a range of behavioral and cognitive strategies that individuals employ to effectively manage both internal and external demands that may tax or even exceed their personal resources. These mechanisms play a pivotal role in determining various psychological outcomes and impacts on an individual's overall mental health. The efficacy of these coping mechanisms is closely monitored through physiological or emotional feedback systems. Furthermore, the ability to adapt existing strategies or devise entirely new responses to challenges is often what distinguishes resilient individuals from those who may succumb to various forms of psychopathology. Sadly, mental health disorders, including and not limited to anxiety and affective

disturbances, persist globally despite numerous advancements that have occurred in both pharmacological and psychotherapeutic interventions available today. This prevalence underscores the pressing necessity for a much deeper understanding of coping processes and their implementation in different scenarios. Compounding the challenge, lower levels of social support—combined with compromised financial status—function as potent stressors in an individual's life. These factors significantly attenuate both the adoption and overall effectiveness of various coping strategies. Consequently, such stressors exacerbate vulnerability to maladaptive outcomes, which can lead to detrimental mental health issues if left unaddressed. Recognizing the significance of these dynamics is crucial in developing more effective interventions. (M. Petten, 2017)(M. Petten, 2017)

2.1 Definition of coping mechanisms

Coping mechanisms are the strategies individuals use to manage the demands and challenges of life. More precisely, psychological coping is defined as an individual's responses, reactions or behavioral patterns to lessen painful or difficult internal emotional states. When experienced stress is perceived as being unmanageable by an individual, they may take actions to reduce the stress induced by the factors involved. These coping mechanisms can be assessed in terms of problem-focused coping or emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping works toward resolving the cause of stress by anticipating consequences, making plans, and seeking information related to the stressful situation. Emotion-focused coping (averting) consists of regulating emotions that result from experiencing distress.

Of these categories, the present research primarily investigates problem-focused coping mechanisms and their effectiveness in managing anxiety. Individuals who employ problem-focused coping techniques befriend and seek the support of others, employ social skills, seek to change the stressor directly, as well as bear their problems with resilience and forbearance. Conversely, those who use emotion-focused coping tend to conceal their troubles, seek alternatives to resolve their difficulties, indulge in cravings, accept the stressful situation passively or seek to mentally remove themselves from the scenario.

2.2 Brief discussion of psychological theories explaining gender and coping

Theories explaining gender differences in coping mechanisms for anxiety include social role theory and biological predispositions. Social role theory posits that men and women exhibit different coping strategies due to socialization: women tend to adopt emotion-focused coping, whereas men generally employ problem-focused coping (Howerton, 2005). This perspective assumes that differential coping is consistent across stressful

situations. By contrast, the structural hypothesis attributes gender disparities in coping to the distinct types of stressors typically encountered by each sex. Biological explanations focus on inherent sex differences shaped by genetic and hormonal factors, which give rise to distinguishable behaviours (M. Petten, 2017). Research further reveals that cultural and social expectations reinforce these patterns. For example, females are more likely than males to utilize avoidance of worry and other avoidance-oriented behaviours, as well as to engage in assistance-seeking strategies—notwithstanding the incongruity that adult males rarely seek professional support. These social and cultural norms significantly influence anxiety management, consistent with the frameworks of social-developmental, behavioural, and social constructionist theories.

2.3 Literature-based insights into how coping is shaped by cultural and social expectations.

Earlier research has sought to determine the intricate relationship between various elements of culture, the surrounding social environment, and individuals' coping styles. Coping mechanisms are defined as the cognitive and behavioural strategies that individuals employ to reduce and manage psychological stress effectively. Peterson (2017) highlighted the significant role that gender socialisation theory plays in shaping the particular coping strategies that are employed by males and females. Additionally, biological predispositions may also have a substantial impact on the diverse strategies that individuals choose to use. Because women and men encounter different demands and pressures in both their professional work and family life, the methods they employ to cope with anxiety can vary significantly by gender. From a biological standpoint, the genes and hormones produced by different sexes create diverse physiological and psychological frameworks in two individuals when they are confronted with the identical situation, which in turn influences their respective responses to stress. Furthermore, social constructionist theory presents a complementary perspective by emphasising the cultural influences that encourage and reinforce behaviours consistent with the traditional feminine and masculine gender roles. Boys and girls are socialised in distinctly different ways, and this socialisation significantly shapes the manner in which individuals cope with anxiety throughout their lives. (M. Petten, 2017)(Howerton, 2005)

3. Gender and Coping Styles

Research indicates that men and women often cope with anxiety in distinctly different ways, each employing strategies that align with societal expectations and individual experiences. Men frequently adopt problem-focused strategies, actively engaging in concentrated efforts to manage or resolve the anxieties confronting them, whether these involve work stress, personal challenges, or difficult relationships. This approach allows

them to tackle issues head-on, seeking solutions and taking direct action to alleviate their worries. In contrast, women tend to employ emotion-focused techniques, aiming to regulate the emotional response elicited by anxiety-inducing situations, such as reaching out to friends for support, expressing their feelings, or engaging in reflective practices to process their emotions. Social role theory further elucidates these patterns by asserting that cultural norms and societal expectations, rather than purely biological factors, largely determine the gender differences noticed in coping styles. Societal stereotypes often endorse assertiveness, independence, and competitiveness for men—traits that align with problem-focused coping—while promoting social connectedness, emotional expressiveness, and nurturance for women, which are consistent with emotion-focused approaches. Consequently, coping strategies adopted in response to anxiety are not solely personal choices made in isolation but instead reflect conformities to socially constructed gender roles and culturally prescribed behaviors, illustrating how deeply ingrained these patterns are within the fabric of society. (Howerton, 2005)(M. Petten, 2017)

4. Social and Cultural Influences

Cultural and social expectations play an undeniably significant and substantial role in shaping and contributing to the reliance on gender-specific coping strategies among a wide array of individuals in different settings. Cultural norms, as well as established social environments that emphasize and actively promote traditional gender roles, tend to reinforce and encourage various forms of sex-typed coping behaviors in numerous circumstances and situations. These societal zones, which primarily rely on conventional roles as their critical organizing principles, induce and help to establish distinct biological sex differences that, in turn, significantly influence the adoption and selection of various sex-typed coping mechanisms by individuals. Methodologically speaking, social role theory provides a much more comprehensive and nuanced account of the origin, development, and perpetuation of sex differences in coping than the biologically based alternatives that have been proposed or suggested. According to this perspective, the observed and recognized sex differences in coping strategies can be largely attributable and intricately linked to gender role expectations and the related socialization processes that individuals undergo throughout their lives. Consequently, many key aspects of social and cultural environments—which actively promote traditional gender roles—also favor and facilitate the ongoing use of sex-typed coping strategies among individuals, further reinforcing these patterns in everyday life. (M. Petten, 2017)(M. Petten, 2017)

5. Psychological and Behavioural Outcomes

Research indicates that there are significant gender-specific psychological and behavioural outcomes arising from the different anxiety coping strategies employed by individuals, with clear and corresponding variations in anxiety levels noted. Due to prevailing social expectations, cultural norms, and formal obligations in society, it is often observed that men tend to favour instrumental or problem-focused coping mechanisms. This approach involves taking direct actions to address the specific problem or situation that is causing emotional distress with the goal of eliminating or significantly reducing that distress. In contrast, women generally show a preference for emotion-focused coping strategies, which primarily centre on managing the emotional response associated with the problem rather than directly addressing the problem itself. Instrumental coping mechanisms typically yield lower levels of distress and are associated with fewer depressive symptoms. On the other hand, when individuals rely heavily on emotion-focused coping strategies, this reliance can predict a higher incidence of depression and increased emotional turmoil. Consequently, it has been observed that women tend to experience more intense and frequent episodes of anxiety compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, previous investigations into the differences in coping strategies related to anxiety disturbances have predominantly concentrated on determining whether men or women are more inclined to utilize a general pattern of either problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies in their coping processes. (M. Petten, 2017)

6. Implications for Mental Health Interventions

The compelling evidence indicating that males and females utilize distinctly different coping strategies to address the same sources of anxiety highlights the significant value of considering gender as a crucial factor in tailoring effective and individualized treatments. Such crucial distinctions, especially when they are caused or reinforced through socialization norms or cultural expectations, strongly imply that a comprehensive understanding of how anxiety operates will necessitate detailed analysis on multiple levels simultaneously. This holistic approach, which encompasses behaviors, societal influences, and psychological factors, will ultimately lead to a far more nuanced and adequate interpretation of any specific context surrounding the experience of anxiety. At the behavioral level, the ultimate causes and consequences of anxiety are necessarily inferred rather than directly observed through mere personal accounts or simple observational techniques. As a result, those explanatory analyses require robust support from other recognized forms of evidence, such as psychological studies, clinical data, and sociocultural examinations, in order to elevate the confidence

in any empirical claims made regarding anxiety and its intricate relationship to gendered coping strategies. Thus, exploring these various dimensions will significantly enhance our understanding of anxiety and promote the development of more effective interventions that are thoughtfully tailored to meet the diverse needs of different genders in coping with anxiety. (M. Petten, 2017)

7. Conclusion

Future research needs to systematically and comprehensively test the various hypotheses that have been generated by the theory that was presented above. Achieving this goal requires moving beyond the limitations of existing questionnaires to develop innovative and new approaches for exploring the complex gender differences that exist in the relationship between antecedent-focused and output regulation of emotions. Furthermore, it is important to investigate the notions of control over emotions, as well as the coordinated engagement of these different types of processes in the regulation of discrete emotions. At a still broader level, a pressing and persistent need continues to exist to make the subjects of gender and the biology of emotion relevant to one another, both at a conceptual and an empirical level. An enhanced understanding of such significant links should, hopefully, make it vastly easier to establish and illuminate the biological basis of gender differences in a wide range of psychological phenomena that are strongly related to affective processing. Gender differences provide a crucial social context within which children learn to express and regulate emotions, as well as to tolerate varying degrees of arousal. These differences in emotional experience and emotional expression are enabled, in part, by the underlying gender differences that are present in the deployment of emotion-regulation processes. When conceptualized as resulting from evolved tendencies in the operation of complex neural systems, such notable differences provide a broad normative framework that extends from infancy through childhood and well into adulthood and beyond. (M. Petten, 2017)

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