



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Coping strategies and emotional exhaustion in mothers of children with special needs during pandemic

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Abstract: During the pandemic, many mothers of children with special needs have faced heightened emotional challenges, leading to increased emotional exhaustion. This study aims to examine the relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies in these mothers, highlighting the importance of effective support mechanisms during this period. This quantitative research used non-probability sampling and included 80 mothers in Tulungagung. Data collection utilized two scales: one for emotional exhaustion and another for coping strategies, administered via questionnaires. Hypothesis testing indicated a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies, with $F = 18.606$ at $p < 0.05$. Emotional exhaustion accounted for 19% of the variance in coping strategies ($R^2=0.193$), underscoring its impact. These findings suggest that addressing emotional exhaustion could improve coping strategies in mothers of children with special needs, potentially guiding more tailored support and interventions to alleviate stress and improve well-being.

Keywords: Coping Strategy, Emotional exhaustion, Mothers who have children with special needs

Abstrak: Selama pandemi, banyak ibu dari anak-anak berkebutuhan khusus menghadapi tantangan emosional yang semakin berat, yang menyebabkan peningkatan kelelahan emosional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk meneliti hubungan antara kelelahan emosional dan strategi coping pada ibu-ibu tersebut, dengan menekankan pentingnya mekanisme dukungan yang efektif selama periode ini. Penelitian kuantitatif ini menggunakan sampling non-probabilitas dan melibatkan 80 ibu di Tulungagung. Pengumpulan data dilakukan menggunakan dua skala: satu untuk mengukur kelelahan emosional dan satu lagi untuk strategi coping, yang disampaikan melalui kuesioner. Pengujian hipotesis menunjukkan adanya hubungan signifikan antara kelelahan emosional dan strategi coping, dengan nilai $F = 18,606$ pada $p < 0,05$. Kelelahan emosional menyumbang 19% dari variabilitas strategi coping ($R^2=0,193$), yang menunjukkan dampak signifikan. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa dengan mengatasi kelelahan emosional, strategi coping pada ibu dari anak-anak berkebutuhan khusus dapat ditingkatkan, sehingga memungkinkan adanya dukungan dan intervensi yang lebih tepat sasaran untuk mengurangi stres dan meningkatkan kesejahteraan.

Kata kunci: Strategi Coping, Kelelahan emosional, Ibu yang memiliki anak berkebutuhan khusus

INTRODUCTION

In family life, the arrival of a child is generally seen as a gift that strengthens familial bonds. However, not all children are born and grow under typical circumstances; some are children with special needs (CSN). Children with special needs experience developmental challenges due to physical, emotional, intellectual, or social differences. According to Asbury (2021), these children require special care, services, and education to support their development.

Parents, especially mothers, play a critical role in meeting these needs, as limitations often prevent CSN from achieving the level of independence typically observed in other children (Bayraklı & Sucuoglu, 2018).

The presence of a child with special needs often brings increased responsibilities and stress for parents. This stress stems from a variety of challenges, including physical limitations, social stigma, and emotional strain associated with caregiving (Caicedo, 2014). Parental stress, especially among mothers, has been shown to increase when providing care for CSN. Studies have highlighted the high levels of stress experienced by mothers of CSN compared to mothers of typically developing children, with stress rates as high as 70% among mothers and 40% among fathers (Vidiagar & Koshy, 2010). Emotional exhaustion in these mothers is a common outcome, manifesting as physical, mental, and emotional fatigue (Maslach & Jackson, 1981).

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A notable case in Kediri, East Java, in 2019 underscores the severity of emotional exhaustion among caregivers. In this instance, a mother reportedly ended the life of her CSN child due to the overwhelming stress and fatigue associated with caregiving. Such incidents underline the critical need for understanding and supporting the mental health of CSN caregivers, particularly in developing regions where resources may be limited.

The global COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already demanding conditions faced by CSN caregivers. Health and social restrictions disrupted regular support systems, forcing many caregivers to assume additional roles such as educators and healthcare aides for their children. Studies have shown that during the pandemic, there was an increase in emotional exhaustion among parents, with caregivers experiencing intensified feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation (Dubey, Biswas, & Gosh, 2021). Enzmann et al (1998) attribute such increases in emotional exhaustion to both heightened workloads and reduced social support—factors that were prevalent during the pandemic.

The pandemic introduced a multitude of changes in daily routines, making it difficult for families, particularly those with children with special needs, to adjust. This sudden shift heightened the psychological burden on parents, especially mothers, who often bore the primary responsibility for caregiving (Datu et al., 2024; Cheng & Lai, 2023). As mothers took on roles beyond caregiving, they were also required to manage their children's education, health, and other developmental needs. This increase in responsibility, coupled with pandemic-related uncertainties, led to greater emotional exhaustion. Research by Gruszka et al. (2023) indicates that many parents, particularly mothers of CSN, reported heightened anxiety and a diminished sense of control over their circumstances.

Emotional exhaustion is a form of chronic stress that occurs when individuals feel overwhelmed by prolonged demands on their emotional and mental resources (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Mothers of CSN experience emotional exhaustion at higher rates than other parents due to the continuous demands of caregiving. The theory of emotional exhaustion proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1981) highlights three key aspects of this condition: physical fatigue, emotional depletion, and mental fatigue. Symptoms include anxiety, irritability, insomnia, and loss of motivation—symptoms that many mothers of CSN report.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) introduced the concept of coping strategies as mechanisms individuals use to manage stress. Coping strategies are divided into two primary categories: problem-focused coping (PFC) and emotion-focused coping (EFC). Problem-focused coping involves taking active steps to address the source of stress, such as seeking solutions or resources, while emotion-focused coping focuses on managing emotions related to stress through methods such as avoidance, seeking support, or acceptance (Sarafino & Smith, 2008). Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model posits that individuals choose coping strategies based on their perception of the stressor's controllability. When stressors are seen as manageable, PFC is often utilized; conversely, when stressors are perceived as uncontrollable, individuals may lean toward EFC.

In the context of emotional exhaustion, research has shown that mothers of CSN tend to adopt problem-focused coping strategies more frequently, especially when faced with predictable caregiving tasks (Nevid et al., 2003). However, during the pandemic, the unpredictability of conditions led many caregivers to rely on emotion-focused

coping strategies due to the lack of external support and resources. Coping strategies that are problem-focused, such as seeking educational resources or developing routines, have been associated with lower stress levels (Horiuchi et al., 2018). Conversely, emotion-focused coping, when used in excess, may contribute to depressive symptoms and a sense of helplessness (Kim et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2010).

The relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies in CSN mothers remains complex. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), emotional exhaustion can impair decision-making abilities, leading individuals to adopt less effective coping mechanisms. For instance, mothers experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion may struggle to implement problem-focused coping strategies, instead relying on less adaptive, emotion-focused strategies that do not mitigate the root causes of stress.

This study aims to explore the relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies among mothers of children with special needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it seeks to investigate how varying levels of emotional exhaustion influence the choice of coping strategies and to identify which strategies may be most effective in mitigating stress for these mothers. By examining this relationship, the study aims to provide insights that could inform interventions and support mechanisms designed to alleviate the burden on CSN caregivers.

Through this research, it is hoped that the findings will not only illuminate the challenges faced by CSN mothers but also contribute to developing support programs that can enhance their resilience and improve the overall quality of life for families with special needs children. Given the ongoing impact of the pandemic, such insights are particularly relevant as families continue to navigate the aftermath and adjust to a new normal.

METHOD

Research design

This study employs a quantitative research method with a correlational design, aiming to examine the relationship between emotional exhaustion (independent variable) and coping strategies (dependent variable) among mothers of children with special needs (CSN) in Tulungagung. The independent variable, emotional exhaustion (X), is operationally defined as an excessive emotional response due to the accumulation of caregiving demands. The dependent variable, coping strategy (Y), is defined as the efforts made by individuals to minimize or reduce emotional exhaustion across various situations.

Data source

The study population comprises mothers of CSN in the Tulungagung region, with 630 children registered in the latest data from the Ministry of Education and Culture (2020). A purposive sampling technique was employed, a non-probability sampling method targeting specific characteristics, ensuring that the sample reflects the population accurately. Following Saifudin Azwar's (2017) recommendation for sample size, approximately 10% of the total population was selected. Thus, 80 mothers were recruited as the study sample to represent the broader population of CSN mothers in Tulungagung.

Research Instruments

Emotional Exhaustion Scale: Developed based on the theory by Leiter and Maslach (2001), this scale consists of items covering three dimensions: physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion. The scale includes 39 items scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "almost never" to "almost always."

Coping Strategies Scale: This scale is adapted from the coping theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1981), which categorizes coping strategies into two dimensions: problem-focused coping (PFC) and emotion-focused coping (EFC). It contains 41 items scored similarly on a Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Validity and Reliability Testing: The instrument validity was tested using Aiken's V, with expert judgment from five lecturers in Islamic Psychology at UIN Sayyid Ali Rahmatullah Tulungagung. Validity values for the emotional exhaustion scale ranged from 0.7 to 0.85, and for the coping strategy scale from 0.8 to 1. Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha yielded a score of 0.916 for emotional exhaustion and 0.912 for coping strategies, both indicating high internal consistency. Differentiation power values for the emotional exhaustion items ranged from 0.318 to 0.702, while the coping strategy items ranged from 0.370 to 0.793, signifying acceptable item discrimination.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in April 2022. The research used a structured questionnaire distributed via an online survey platform to allow respondents to participate remotely, in line with pandemic restrictions. Respondents were provided clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire to ensure accuracy in data collection. Instructions included descriptions of each response option on the Likert scale to avoid response biases and to facilitate honest and accurate self-assessment by the participants.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided informed consent before participation. Confidentiality and data privacy were maintained throughout the study, with personal information anonymized and all data stored securely to protect respondent privacy.

Data analysis technique

The types of data analysis techniques used by the author in this study are classical assumption tests and hypothesis tests. Classical assumption tests are used, such as the normality test, the linearity test, and the heterokedasticity test. While the hypothesis test used is like a simple linear regression test, classical assumption tests and hypothesis tests using the help of SPSS 23.0 for Windows applications

RESULTS

This section presents the results of data analysis, starting with the demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the hypothetical data of the variables, the categorization of emotional exhaustion and coping strategy levels, and the results of classical assumption tests. Finally, a simple linear regression analysis is performed to evaluate the relationship between

emotional exhaustion and coping strategies among mothers of children with special needs (CSN).

Respondent Demographics and Sample Characteristics

The data collected from 80 respondents provide insight into the demographic characteristics and classification of special needs in children. This information is essential for understanding the context of the research participants.

As shown in Table 1, mothers aged 20-30 years dominate the sample (45%), indicating that younger mothers are more likely to have children with special needs compared to those in the 30-40 and 40-50 age ranges. The data also reveal that children with intellectual disabilities constitute the majority (55%) of the sample, reflecting a significant need for support and resources for families managing intellectual disabilities.

Variable Descriptive Statistics

The next step involved analyzing the hypothetical data for emotional exhaustion and coping strategy scales, as shown in Table 2. This provides an overview of the respondents' general levels of emotional exhaustion and their coping strategies.

The emotional exhaustion scale has a mean score of 97 and a standard deviation of 19, suggesting moderate levels of emotional exhaustion among the sample. Meanwhile, the coping strategy scale shows a mean of 102, indicating that respondents generally employ a moderate to high level of coping strategies in response to caregiving demands.

Table 1.
Demographic Data of Respondents

Variable	N	%
Age		
20-30 years	36	45
30-40 years	32	40
40-50 years	12	15
Special needs Classification		
Deaf	1	1.25
Speech Impairment	6	7.25
Mobility Impairment	11	13.25
Visual Impairment	11	13.25
Intellectual Disability	44	55
Learning Difficulties	7	8.75

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
Emotional Exhaustion (x)	97	19
Coping Strategy (y)	102	20

Categorization of Emotional Exhaustion and Coping Strategies

To further clarify the levels of emotional exhaustion and coping strategies among respondents, the scores were categorized into three levels: low, medium, and high, as displayed in Table 3.

In Table 3, the majority of respondents (80%) have moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, while 20%

experience high levels of exhaustion. On the coping strategy scale, 57.5% of respondents score in the high category, indicating frequent use of coping strategies, whereas 42.5% are in the medium range. These results imply that while emotional exhaustion is prevalent, many mothers actively engage in coping mechanisms to manage their stress.

Classical Assumption Tests

Prior to conducting hypothesis testing, classical assumption tests were performed to ensure the data met the necessary requirements for regression analysis. The results of the normality, linearity, and heteroskedasticity tests are presented in Table 4.

The normality test (Kolmogorov-Smirnov) resulted in a p-value of 0.167, confirming that the data are normally distributed. The linearity test yielded a p-value of 0.654, suggesting a linear relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies. The heteroskedasticity test showed no issues, allowing us to proceed with regression analysis.

Simple Linear Regression Analysis

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between emotional exhaustion

and coping strategies, as shown in Table 5. The results show an R value of 0.439, indicating a moderate positive correlation between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies. The R-squared value of 0.193 suggests that emotional exhaustion accounts for approximately 19.3% of the variance in coping strategies, with the remainder influenced by other factors.

The positive coefficient (B = 0.559, $p < 0.05$) indicates a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies. The F-test yielded a value of 18.606 ($p < 0.05$), further confirming the significant effect of emotional exhaustion on coping strategies.

Interpretation of Findings

The regression results indicate that emotional exhaustion significantly influences coping strategies. Practically, this suggests that as mothers of CSN experience higher levels of emotional exhaustion, they are more likely to adopt diverse coping strategies to mitigate stress. The 19.3% contribution of emotional exhaustion to coping strategies suggests that emotional exhaustion is a notable factor, though other personal and external factors also play a role. This finding highlights the importance of targeted interventions to support CSN caregivers in managing emotional exhaustion effectively, especially through enhanced coping mechanisms.

Table 3.
Categories of Emotional Exhaustion and Coping Strategy Levels

Variable	Category	Score	F	%
Emotional Exhaustion (x)	Low	$X < 78$	0	0%
	Medium	$78 \leq X < 116$	64	80%
	High	$X \geq 116$	16	20%
Coping Strategy (y)	Low	$X < 82$	0	0%
	Medium	$82 \leq X < 122$	34	42.5%
	High	$X \geq 122$	46	57.5%

Table 4.
Classical Assumption Test Results

Test	Statistic	Sig.	Conclusion
Normality Test	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Sig.	0.167	Normally distributed ($p > 0.05$)
Linearity Test	Deviation from Linearity Sig.	0.654	Linear relationship ($p > 0.05$)
Heteroskedasticity Test	Residual Plot	-	No heteroskedasticity detected

Table 5.
Coefficient and Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
Emotional Exhaustion - Coping Strategy	0.439	0.193	0.182	8.672

Table 6.
Regression Coefficients

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	61.134	14.057	-	4.349	0.000
Emotional Exhaustion (X)	0.559	0.129	0.439	4.313	0.000

DISCUSSION

In this study, the categorization test on emotional exhaustion variables showed that 64 respondents (80%)

were in the moderate emotional exhaustion category, while 16 respondents (20%) were in the high emotional exhaustion category. Meanwhile, in the categorization test on coping strategy variables, 46 respondents (57.5%) were

in the high-category coping strategy, and 34 respondents (42.5%) were in the moderate coping strategy category. Thus, there is a significant influence of emotional exhaustion on coping strategies among CSN mothers. The value of $F = 18.606$ is significant at $p < 0.05$. In addition, the analysis showed that emotional exhaustion contributed 19% ($R^2 = 0.193$) to the use of coping strategies by CSN mothers, indicating a significant influence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated emotional exhaustion for mothers of children with special needs (CSN), adding new dimensions of stress and challenges. The lockdown measures and health restrictions disrupted regular support systems, compelling mothers to undertake additional caregiving responsibilities, which further intensified their emotional strain (Dubey et al., 2020; Gruszka et al., 2023). These unprecedented circumstances forced many CSN mothers to utilize more coping strategies, though often with mixed effectiveness depending on individual resilience and resource availability.

According to Mastuti (2010), positive beliefs in individuals can help solve problems and overcome obstacles. Individuals with strong problem-solving beliefs tend to use problem-focused coping (PFC) strategies to address their issues. Boutrye, Maurel, and Berraud (2007) also found that PFC is negatively correlated with depression, while emotion-focused coping (EFC) is positively correlated with depression, which can result from prolonged emotional exhaustion. During the pandemic, many mothers experienced increased emotional exhaustion, leading to a shift towards emotion-focused coping strategies (Cheng & Lai, 2023). This coping approach often resulted in increased anxiety and depression, as mothers lacked the social support required to effectively manage their caregiving responsibilities.

This study indicates that emotional exhaustion significantly affects the use of coping strategies among CSN mothers, with a higher prevalence of emotional exhaustion leading to a greater reliance on coping strategies. During the pandemic, the categorization test found that 80% of respondents experienced moderate levels of emotional exhaustion, while 57.5% of respondents showed a high use of coping strategies. This suggests that the pandemic necessitated a reliance on diverse coping mechanisms, both problem-focused and emotion-focused, to adapt to increased stress (Datu et al., 2024; Gruszka et al., 2023).

Safarino (1998) suggests that individuals experiencing emotional exhaustion are likely to employ problem-focused coping strategies to positively manage difficult situations. Miranda (2013) argued that mothers who experience emotional exhaustion need effective coping strategies to make proper social adjustments. However, without sufficient coping resources, they are prone to avoidance behaviors, exacerbating their negative perceptions of problems and making adaptation harder. Therefore, it was concluded that the higher the mother's emotional exhaustion, the greater the impact on her coping strategy, often leading to an overreliance on less adaptive strategies during periods of intense stress, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The contribution of emotional exhaustion to coping strategies in CSN mothers was found to be 19% in this study. While this may appear modest, it is nonetheless significant in the daily realities of CSN mothers, particularly during a crisis like the pandemic. Similar studies have reported varying degrees of contribution, emphasizing that while emotional exhaustion is a key determinant, other factors such as social support, individual resilience, and external assistance are also crucial (Syahrina et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2024).

Practical implications from this research include the development of intervention programs aimed at reducing emotional exhaustion among CSN mothers, especially during crises. Establishing peer-support networks or providing professional counseling services can mitigate the effects of emotional exhaustion, fostering better coping strategies. Additionally, policymakers could consider creating community-based programs that provide respite care for CSN families, ensuring that mothers have adequate time to rest and recuperate. These strategies could help mothers adopt more constructive coping strategies, as recommended by Lazarus and Folkman (1984).

The findings also support and expand on the theories by Maslach and Jackson (1981) and Lazarus & Folkman (1987). According to Maslach and Jackson, emotional exhaustion, as experienced by CSN mothers during the pandemic, encompasses physical, emotional, and mental fatigue. Our findings clarify that such exhaustion influences the choice of coping mechanisms, often prompting a shift towards less adaptive, emotion-focused coping during uncontrollable stressors like a pandemic. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized that coping is influenced by the perceived controllability of a stressor; during the pandemic, many stressors were uncontrollable, which could explain the predominance of emotion-focused coping among CSN mothers.

Limitations of this research include the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The data collection method, relying on self-report questionnaires, may also introduce biases due to participants' subjective perceptions. Future research should consider including more diverse participants, such as single fathers or working mothers, to enrich and validate the findings related to emotional exhaustion and coping strategies in different caregiving contexts. Expanding the sample size and employing mixed methods, such as qualitative interviews alongside quantitative measures, would also provide deeper insights.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The present study examined the relationship between emotional exhaustion and coping strategies among 80 CSN mothers in Tulungagung, aged 20 to 30 years, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study found that emotional exhaustion significantly influenced coping strategies, with an F -value of 18.606 at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. Emotional exhaustion contributed 19% to the variance in coping strategies ($R^2 = 0.193$), highlighting the need for targeted interventions.

The findings suggest that emotional exhaustion is a common experience among CSN mothers, particularly during crises like the pandemic. Addressing emotional exhaustion through effective coping strategies could improve the mental health and well-being of these mothers. For practical applications, interventions such as support groups, community programs, and professional counseling services are recommended to assist CSN mothers in managing their stress and developing effective coping mechanisms.

For future research, expanding the study to include single fathers, single mothers, and mothers who are also career women would provide a broader perspective. Such diversity could help strengthen research outcomes related to emotional exhaustion and coping strategies, offering more generalized conclusions. Researchers should also explore how differences in caregiving roles and external

support systems influence coping mechanisms in times of crisis, contributing further to the field of parental mental health and resilience.

DECLARATIONS

Conflict of interests Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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Availability Of Data And Materials

The article and supplementary materials contain the original contributions discussed in the study. Original datasets are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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