

# Stress Coping Strategies among Adolescents Who Are Victims of Bullying in Vocational High Schools: A Qualitative Descriptive Approach

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## Abstract

Bullying is a form of violence that often occurs in schools and has a significant impact on the psychological condition of adolescents. This study aims to analyze the stress coping strategies used by adolescent victims of bullying and the role of social support in helping them overcome emotional pressure. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach involving two respondents who experienced verbal and physical bullying at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan, North Sumatra. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis technique. The results showed that respondents used different coping strategies based on their subjective assessment of the situation. The first respondent used emotion-focused coping more because they felt unable to change the situation, while the second respondent tended to apply problem-focused coping by confronting the perpetrators and seeking help. Social support from guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, and peers proved to be a protective factor that strengthened the psychological resilience of victims. This study emphasizes the importance of *whole-school approach-based* school interventions to create a safe environment that supports the psychosocial recovery of students who are victims of bullying.

**Keywords:** bullying, stress coping, adolescents, social support, mental health, whole-school approach.

## INTRODUCTION

Schools, as formal educational institutions, play a fundamental role in shaping the character, personality, and psychological development of students. The function of schools is not limited to the transfer of knowledge, but also includes social-emotional development, interpersonal skills, and the formation of students' identities. Law Number 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System emphasizes that the educational process must be carried out holistically by paying attention to spiritual, emotional, social, and academic dimensions. Thus, schools should ideally be safe, comfortable, and conducive environments for all students to develop optimally. However, the reality on the ground shows that schools are still places where various forms of violence between students occur, one of which is bullying, which to date is increasingly worrying both nationally and globally.

Bullying has become an international phenomenon that has received serious attention from researchers, education practitioners, and international institutions such as UNESCO (2020). Bullying is defined as aggressive behavior that is carried out repeatedly and involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus, 1993). These acts include physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying that utilizes digital technology. Kowalski, Limber, and McCord (2021) emphasize that the development of social media has expanded the forms and impacts of bullying so that it can occur anytime and anywhere, including outside the school environment. Various global studies show that the prevalence of bullying in schools continues to increase, and its impact on the mental health of adolescents is increasingly alarming.

In Indonesia, the problem of bullying has reached alarming levels. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2018) shows that 41.1% of Indonesian students have experienced physical, verbal, or social bullying. This figure places Indonesia in the category of countries with the highest rates of bullying in the world. The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI, 2021) also reported that bullying cases were the highest number of complaints in the education sector, with a total of 37,381 reports between 2011 and 2019. This figure only

reflects formal reports, while the number of unreported cases is estimated to be much higher due to *a culture of silence* and the normalization of aggressive behavior among adolescents.

Bullying is not merely a physical or verbal act, but a form of psychological violence that has long-term effects. A number of international studies have found that victims of bullying tend to experience anxiety disorders, depression, low self-esteem, sleep disorders, and social isolation (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Hinduja and Patchin (2020) add that victims of bullying, especially those who experience repeated bullying, are at risk of suicidal ideation due to unaddressed psychological pressure. The long-term effects of bullying can also affect victims' social development into adulthood, including the risk of social isolation, difficulty forming interpersonal relationships, and emotional regulation disorders (Daine et al., 2013; Klomek et al., 2019).

In the context of developmental psychology, stress coping is an important concept used to understand how individuals respond to threats or pressures from the environment. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain that stress coping is a dynamic process involving cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage internal and external demands that are perceived to exceed an individual's capacity. They divide stress coping into two main categories, namely *problem-focused coping* and *emotion-focused coping*. Problem-focused coping focuses on efforts to overcome the source of stress directly through concrete actions, such as seeking help, confronting the perpetrator, or problem solving. In contrast, emotion-focused coping focuses on managing negative emotions through strategies such as avoidance, relaxation, reappraisal, or distraction. Individuals use these two strategies flexibly depending on their perceptions and abilities in dealing with stressful situations.

In the context of bullying, various studies show that successful stress coping is greatly influenced by the social support received by victims. Espelage and Holt (2013) found that adolescents who have strong social support networks, such as support from friends, parents, and teachers, tend to have more adaptive coping strategies. Holt et al. (2014) emphasized that emotional support and a sense of belonging in the social environment play an important role in reducing the risk of depression and anxiety in victims of bullying. A responsive school environment also contributes greatly to strengthening adaptive coping, especially through the role of guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, and effective anti-bullying policies.

The conditions at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan show a phenomenon similar to national findings. Initial observations show that some students experience both physical and verbal bullying. Forms of bullying include teasing, physical insults, pulling on collars, hitting, and other aggressive behaviors that are often considered "jokes" by the perpetrators. However, for the victims, this behavior causes serious emotional impacts such as fear, withdrawal from social environments, discomfort in class, and decreased self-confidence. This situation becomes even more complex when victims do not have the courage to report the bullying or do not receive adequate social support, so they tend to keep the problem to themselves and potentially experience prolonged stress.

Although many studies have discussed the relationship between bullying and its psychological impact on adolescents, studies on how adolescents manage stress due to bullying using various coping strategies are still limited, especially in the context of vocational schools in Indonesia. Research on the subjective experience of stress coping among adolescent victims of bullying in rural or non-urban schools is also very rare. Thus, there is an important *research gap*, namely the lack of in-depth studies on the stress coping mechanisms used by adolescent victims of bullying in the context of vocational high schools in rural areas such as SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan.

In addition, most existing studies use a quantitative approach, which does not provide a comprehensive picture of the emotional experiences, internal processes, and psychological dynamics experienced by victims. A qualitative approach is needed to explore the subjective experiences of victims in depth, understand the meaning that victims give to their experiences of bullying, and identify the factors that influence their choice of coping strategies. Therefore, this study is important to provide a richer understanding of the stress coping mechanisms used by adolescent victims of bullying and their contribution to building *psychological resilience*.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze in depth the stress coping strategies used by adolescent victims of bullying at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan, as well as to evaluate the role of the social environment, especially the support from guidance counselors, parents, and peers, in helping victims deal with psychological pressure. The findings of this study are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of stress coping studies in adolescents, as well as provide practical implications for schools in designing effective interventions to prevent and deal with bullying cases comprehensively.

## METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of adolescents who were victims of bullying. This approach was chosen because, according to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods are the appropriate way to explore complex social and psychological phenomena that cannot be explained quantitatively. The research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan, Mandailing Natal Regency, North Sumatra, with the data collection period lasting for two months after obtaining research permission from the school and faculty.

The research subjects and informants were determined using purposive sampling, which is the selection of participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). The main respondents were two adolescents who had experienced bullying, both verbal and physical, and were willing to participate. To strengthen the credibility of the data, this study also involved additional informants, namely the Guidance and Counseling (BK) teacher, homeroom teacher, and one peer student. The use of these multiple sources of information was also part of the application of source triangulation as recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985) to increase the validity of the findings.

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews with semi-structured guidelines, direct observation of student behavior and interactions in the school environment, and documentation in the form of school records and counseling activity archives. The data obtained was then analyzed using the thematic analysis technique developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process included familiarization with the data, identification of initial codes, grouping of codes into themes, review of theme consistency, conceptual definition of themes, and presentation of results in the form of comprehensive thematic narratives.

To ensure data validity, this study applied source triangulation techniques, member checking with participants to confirm data accuracy, and audit trails to systematically document the research process as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). With this procedure, the reliability, credibility, and transparency of the research can be guaranteed in accordance with the methodological standards of qualitative research in reputable scientific publications.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that adolescent victims of bullying at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan exhibit a variety of stress coping strategies that are influenced by their perceptions of stressful situations, personal capacity, and the social support they receive. These findings are in line with the theoretical framework of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which views coping as a dynamic cognitive and behavioral process, in which individuals assess whether the situation they are experiencing can be changed (*primary appraisal*) and assess their resources to deal with the situation (*secondary appraisal*). In both respondents, this appraisal process influenced the selection of different coping strategies—KU used emotion-focused coping more, while MA chose problem-focused coping.

### 1. The Dynamics of Threat Perception in Determining Coping

The difference in coping strategies between KU and MA can be understood through the subjective assessment process carried out by each individual towards the bullying situation they experienced. KU, who experienced verbal bullying such as teasing about his physical appearance, skin color, and way of dressing, assessed that he did not have the power to change the situation. He saw the perpetrators as socially dominant, and this condition created

psychological helplessness. This assessment causes KU to use more emotional management strategies such as crying, withdrawing, writing in a diary, listening to music, and participating in extracurricular activities. These findings are in line with Sari's (2010) research, which shows that victims of verbal bullying tend to choose internal coping strategies such as avoidance or suppressing emotions because they feel unable to fight back against the perpetrator directly.

In contrast, MA respondents who experienced physical bullying assessed themselves as having the capacity to respond to such aggressive actions. Although initially they also withdrew and avoided confrontation, over time they began to dare to confront the perpetrators and communicate their discomfort. This shows an appraisal that the situation can be changed through direct action. Research by Espelage and Holt (2013) supports this finding, namely that adolescents who have a higher perception of control over their social environment tend to use problem-focused coping in dealing with bullying. This perception of control is reinforced by the support of the school environment, enabling MA to take adaptive action.

Overall, these findings reinforce the premise that coping is not a fixed characteristic, but depends on subjective assessments of threats and individual resources. Thus, school interventions need to consider these differences in appraisal when designing psychological support for victims of bullying.

## 2. The Role of Emotion Regulation in Adolescent Coping Strategies

Emotion regulation plays a key role in the coping process, especially for adolescents who choose emotion-focused coping such as KU. Adolescents are in a phase of psychological development where their ability to manage emotions is not yet fully mature (Steinberg, 2017), so the experience of bullying can trigger more intense emotional dysregulation. In this study, KU used various strategies such as writing, listening to music, and participating in extracurricular activities to relieve emotional pressure. According to Folkman (2010), emotion-focused coping is not a form of weakness, but rather an important adaptive strategy in conditions where the source of stress is difficult to change. This strategy serves as a *buffer* that prevents the accumulation of distress that can develop into more serious psychological disorders.

Another study by Aldao et al. (2015) shows that adolescents who use adaptive emotion regulation strategies such as *distraction*, *reappraisal*, and *engagement in positive activities* have a lower risk of depression and anxiety. The findings in this study indicate that activities such as writing in a journal and listening to music are mechanisms for channeling emotions that help stabilize psychological well-being. These activities allow individuals to express their feelings without having to confront the perpetrator, while also providing space for reflective contemplation of the experience.

These findings also reinforce the theory that emotional coping strategies can be the foundation for a transition to more proactive coping if adolescents receive appropriate social support. In other words, emotion-focused coping can serve as a bridge to problem-focused coping if adolescents feel secure and confident in their environment.

## 3. Social Support as a Protective Factor in Adolescent Coping

One important finding in this study is that social support from guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, and peers plays a significant role in strengthening adaptive coping in both respondents. Guidance counselors provide a safe space for victims to share their experiences, offer emotional validation, and help victims develop problem-solving strategies. This role is consistent with the findings of Holt et al. (2014), who emphasize that social support is a key protective factor in reducing the risk of depression due to bullying.

Social support not only helps alleviate psychological pressure but also improves victims' perceptions of their own abilities. In MA's case, encouragement from the guidance counselor and peers increased his courage to confront the perpetrator directly, allowing him to shift from emotion-focused coping to more effective problem-focused coping. This is reinforced by Rueger et al.'s (2016) research, which found that social support from teachers and peers has a

strong relationship with increased self-efficacy in adolescents when dealing with interpersonal conflicts.

In this study, the social support provided to KU also contributed to a decrease in anxiety and feelings of worthlessness. This is important because victims of bullying often experience social isolation and internalization of problems (Hunter & Boyle, 2004). With trusted adults such as guidance counselors, victims feel safer and less alone in facing pressure.

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), social support from the micro environment (teachers, family, friends) plays an important role in moderating the negative effects of bullying. This ecological model emphasizes the importance of positive interactions in the proximal environment to shape adolescents' psychological resilience.

#### **4. The Role of School Context and Social Climate in Coping**

In addition to individual factors and social support, the school context and social climate also have a strong influence on adolescents' coping strategies. This study found that a responsive school environment, especially through the role of guidance counselors, helps build a sense of security for victims. UNESCO (2020) recommends *a whole-school approach* to dealing with bullying, which is a comprehensive approach that involves all elements of the school in the prevention and intervention of bullying.

Schools with a clear disciplinary culture, effective communication between teachers and students, and structured anti-bullying policies provide space for victims to report incidents and receive protection. In MA's case, good communication with the guidance counselor gave her the courage to take problem-focused coping measures. Meanwhile, for KU, although she did not dare to confront the perpetrator directly, the presence of the guidance counselor provided a sense of security and helped relieve emotional pressure.

Another study by Wang, Berry, and Swearer (2013) shows that students' perceptions of school support can influence their tendency to use adaptive coping. Schools that are considered friendly and supportive increase the likelihood of students seeking help when experiencing bullying. These findings are highly relevant to the context of this study, as both respondents benefited from responsive school policies through counseling services.

#### **5. Theoretical and Practical Implications for Bullying Intervention**

The findings of this study provide several important implications, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the results of this study expand our understanding of the dynamics of stress coping in adolescent victims of bullying by showing that the choice of coping strategies is complexly influenced by perceptions of control, bullying intensity, social support, and school climate. These findings reinforce the relevance of Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) coping model in the context of bullying among Indonesian adolescents, while also showing that the coping process can shift from emotion-focused to problem-focused as social support and sense of security increase.

Practically, the research results emphasize the importance of comprehensive anti-bullying interventions in schools. Prevention and management programs should include:

- a. Character education and emotional literacy, to help students understand how to manage their emotions.
- b. Regular counseling focused on strengthening adaptive coping.
- c. A safe and accessible bullying reporting system.
- d. Parent involvement in bullying prevention programs.
- e. Teacher training on early detection of bullying and psychological support.

The implementation of a *whole-school approach* policy as recommended by UNESCO (2020) is highly relevant, as this approach has been proven effective in significantly reducing bullying rates when consistently applied.

#### **6. Contributions of the Research and Its Limitations**

This study contributes to providing an in-depth description of the stress coping strategies of adolescent victims of bullying in vocational high schools, which has rarely been studied. The findings of this study highlight the importance of the interaction between

individuals and their social environment in the formation of adaptive coping. This contribution is important for the development of adolescent stress coping theory and can be used as a basis for designing interventions in schools.

However, this study has limitations, namely the limited number of respondents and the research context that only covers one school. Further research needs to involve more participants and compare coping strategies in various school and cultural contexts.

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that adolescent victims of bullying at SMK Negeri 1 Kotanopan experience various forms of bullying, both verbal and physical, which have a significant impact on their emotional, social, and academic conditions. The findings reveal that the stress coping strategies used by the two respondent groups differ and are influenced by their perceptions of the level of threat and their personal resources. KU respondents tended to use emotion-focused coping, such as avoidance, crying, writing, listening to music, and participating in positive activities as a form of emotional regulation when they felt the situation was uncontrollable. In contrast, MA respondents showed a tendency to use problem-focused coping, including confronting the perpetrator directly, asking for help from the guidance counselor, and rearranging their social circle to reduce the risk of exposure to bullying.

These differences in coping strategies confirm Lazarus and Folkman's theory that coping is a dynamic process determined by an individual's appraisal of a situation. In addition, this study found that social support, especially from guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, and peers, plays an important role as a protective factor in helping victims manage their emotions, build a sense of security, and improve their ability to take adaptive actions. Adequate social support has been proven to moderate the negative effects of bullying, reduce anxiety, and improve adolescents' psychosocial competence in dealing with stress.

This study also emphasizes the importance of a responsive school environment, including clear anti-bullying policies, preventive counseling services, and ongoing psychosocial interventions. The implementation of the *whole-school approach* recommended by UNESCO is relevant because it can create a safe school climate that supports students' psychological development. Thus, these findings contribute to the development of school intervention strategies, emphasizing that bullying management should not only focus on perpetrators and victims but also include aspects of school culture, social relations, and formal support mechanisms.

Overall, this study enriches our understanding of the dynamics of stress coping in adolescent victims of bullying and shows that a combination of adaptive coping strategies and strong social support can build *psychological resilience*. Further research is recommended to involve more respondents, examine gender differences in coping, and explore the role of the family and the wider community so that the interventions designed have a more holistic and applicable scope in various educational contexts.

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