

## The State of Elderly Coping with Stress

### Yaşlı Bireylerin Stresle Başa Çıkma Durumları

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The objective of this study was to determine the state of elderly coping with stress.

**Methods:** This descriptive study was conducted sixty years old and over 106 individuals living at home within society. As data collection forms, a survey-form containing socio-demographic characteristics of all the individuals were recorded features of elderly and a Scale of Stress-Coping Manners (SSCM) was used. Percentage, mean + standard deviation, Mann Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis methods were used for assessment of the collected data.

**Results:** The mean age of the study group was 68.0±5.5. 57.5% of the participants were women, 52.8% had four and more than four children and 61.3% had a chronic illness. The scores of stress-coping manners of the elderly were high (73.86±8.18). The score averages of stress-coping of the women, the individuals who had three children and less, and the elderly who had no chronic illness were high and statistically significant (p<0.05).

**Conclusion:** In this study, it was determined that the elderly were successful in coping with stress. Different sources of stress that comes with the aging process to deal with the stress is important for the health of the elderly. Therefore, in order to increase the quality of life and healthy aging it is necessary to evaluate the situation of elderly coping with stress.

**Keywords:** Elderly, stress, stress-coping

#### ÖZ

**Amaç:** Bu çalışmanın amacı, yaşlı bireylerin stresle başa çıkma durumlarının belirlenmesidir.

**Materyal Metot:** Tanımlayıcı tipteki çalışma toplum içinde evde yaşayan, altmış yaş ve üzeri toplam 106 bireyle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veri toplama formu olarak; bireylerin sosyo demografik özelliklerini içeren anket formu, Stresle Başa Çıkma Tarzları Ölçeği (SBTÖ) kullanılmıştır. Elde edilen verilerin değerlendirilmesinde yüzdelik, ortalama+standart sapma, Mann Whitney U ve Kruskal-Wallis yöntemleri kullanılmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Çalışma grubunun ortalama yaşı 68.0±5.5'dir. Katılımcıların %57.5'inin kadın, %52.8'inin dört ve dörtten fazla çocuk sahibi oldukları ve %61.3'ünün kronik hastalığı olduğu belirlenmiştir. Yaşlı bireylerin stresle başa çıkma tarzları puanlarının (73.86±8.18) yüksek olduğu belirlenmiştir. Kadınların, 60-69 yaş grubunda olanların, üç ve daha az çocuk sahibi olan ve kronik hastalığı olmayan yaşlı bireylerin stresle başa çıkma puan ortalamaları yüksek olup istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bulunmuştur (p<0.05).

**Sonuç:** Bu çalışmada, yaşlı bireylerin stresle başa çıkmada başarılı oldukları saptanmıştır. Yaşlanma sürecinin beraberinde getirdiği farklı stres kaynakları nedeniyle bireylerin bu streslerle başa çıkma durumları yaşlı sağlığı açısından önem taşımaktadır. Bu nedenle, yaşam kalitesinin artırılması ve sağlıklı yaşlanma için yaşlı bireylerin stresle başa çıkma durumlarının değerlendirilmesi gerekmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yaşlı birey, stres, stresle başa çıkma

#### INTRODUCTION

The problems of the elderly population have become more important due to the extended human life and an increase of the elderly population as a result. It is estimated that the elderly population in the world will reach two billions in 2050 (1). According to Turkish Statistical Institute 2014 data, the elderly population in Turkey makes up 7.7% of the entire population and lifetime is 75 years in men and 79 years in women (2,3). Elongation of life time in Turkey like in other countries, changing family structure and social relationships, diminishing activity level with developed technology, and intense stress caused by living conditions lead to an augmentation of aging-dependent problems in the elderly population (4). The elderly stage brings along many health problems and chronic illnesses and limitation and disability rates increase depending on this (5). Changes occur in social life of individuals along with aging. Retirement leads to a regression of social statue of the elderly in parallel to a decrease in the income of most of the elderly. At the same time, it was reported that leaving of children from home and the unfavorable effects of physiological changes narrow

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social environment of the elderly (6). Therefore, individuals face with various stress sources during the aging process. Elderly individuals can experience stress more intensely gradually due to the adaptation effort to the changes caused by aging.

Stress is physical and emotional reactions given to changes. Individuals can experience stress no matter what age they are. Coping with stress is explained as diminishing and removing of emotional tension caused by the stress source or the entirety of the behavioral and emotional reaction shown to this tension (7). Stressful life events experienced by individuals and their coping manners can vary according to the ethnic structure (8,9). In addition to the stress created by unique problems of the elderly stage, diminished functional and cognitive state of the individuals and their social and economic status changes can make the elderly individuals to cope with problems difficult. At the same time, the difficulties experienced by individuals during the adaptation process to aging can affect their self-respect and life satisfaction unfavorably (10). Coping with these problems piling up during the aging stage is crucial to improve the skills of the individuals for maintaining their health and extend their lifetime. The skill to cope with stress can vary among individuals and depending on the experienced situation (11).

It was emphasized that effective using of stress-coping methods is crucial for the protection of physical and psychological health of individuals when faced with stress-causing life events (12). Therefore, it is important for elderly health to assess the state of stress-coping of the elderly first of all and to act based on their necessities and to teach them to cope with stress. There are scarce studies in Turkey to determine the stress-coping states of the elderly people (13). Accordingly, the objective of this study was to determine the stress-coping state of the elderly individuals. Thus, raising awareness about the factors effective to cope with stress of the elderly individuals and considering them during generating an initiative plan will be ensured.

## Methods

This descriptive study was conducted on the elderly individuals living at home within society. The study group consisted of the volunteering individuals at the age of sixty and over, living in Yozgat City and who can establish communication. Without making a sampling estimation, all the elderly who were visited at home in the scope of public health nursing field practice were included in the research scope. The individuals who were diagnosed with dementia and Alzheimer and visually and hearing impaired individuals were excluded from the research.

A survey form prepared by the researchers and the Scale of Stress-Coping Manners (SSCM) was included in the data collection form. The survey form consisted of 12 questions on demographic information and social characteristics. The Scale of Stress-Coping Manners is a 33-item scale which was developed by Amirkhan in 1990 (14) and Turkish validity reliability study was conducted by Aysan in 1994 (12). The scale is used to obtain feedback on the coping methods used in stress situations. The scale has three sub-dimensions namely problem solving, social support seeking and avoiding. The elderly individuals were asked to answer to the question statements in a Likert type changing from one to three as "None" (one), "Some" (two) and "A lot"

(three). The total score obtained in the scale was 33-99. A higher score illustrated that stress-coping states of the individuals were good (12).

The permit and ethical committee approval was received for conducting the research. The objective and method of the research were explained to the elderly individuals first in the research and their oral consents were received. The data collection form was applied to 106 individuals by using the face-to-face interview.

## Statistical analysis

The data on the participants were analyzed by SPSS 15.0 statistics program at the end of the application. The percentage distribution, mean + standard deviation, Mann Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis test was used for the assessment of the obtained data.

## Results

The average age of the study group was  $68.0 \pm 5.5$  and 57.5% were women. 72.6% of the research participants were elementary school graduates, 53.8% were married, 93.4% had children and 61.3% had a chronic illness. It was determined that 57.5% of the elderly lived in the city center for a long time and 56.5% had more than four children. Almost all of the elderly individuals participating in the research follow daily news. 52.2% of the literate elderly individuals read newspaper (Table 1).

The score average of the Scale of Stress-Coping Manner of the elderly individuals was  $73.86 \pm 8.18$  (Table 2). Alpha internal consistency of the scale was found as 0.81.

The stress-coping manner score averages of the elderly individuals who participated in the research according to the age groups, educational status, chronic illness state, birth place, long-term living place, number of children and newspaper reading situation were scrutinized and the difference between the groups was found to be statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). It was found that stress-coping manner score averages of the individuals at the age of 60-69 in our study were higher than those of the individuals at the age of 70 years old and over ( $p = 0.02$ ). The average scores of stress-coping manners of the women were higher than those of the men ( $p = 0.04$ ). Considering the stress-coping manner score averages based on chronic illness state, it was found that they were higher in the individuals who did not have a chronic illness in comparison to the ones who had a chronic illness ( $p = 0.00$ ). At the same time, stress-coping manner score averages of the individuals who were born in the city center were higher than those of the ones who were born in county/village, and the score averages of the individuals who lived in the city center for a long period were higher than those of the individuals who lived in county/village for a long time ( $p < 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

When the stress-coping manner score averages of the elderly individuals were compared in our study, it was found that the score averages of the elementary school graduates were higher than those of the illiterate ones and the secondary school/high school graduates ( $p < 0.05$ ). In the examination of the number of children, it is seen that stress-coping manner score averages of the individuals who had three and less children

were higher than those of the individuals who had four and more children ( $p < 0.05$ ). Similarly, when stress-coping manner score averages of the individuals who read newspaper and the individuals who did not read newspaper were compared, there was a statistically significant difference between the groups and the score averages of the individuals who did not read newspaper were found to be higher than those of the individuals who read newspaper ( $p < 0.05$ ). In our study, when stress-coping manner score averages of the married and single individuals were compared, the score averages of the married individuals were high and there was no statistically significant difference between the groups ( $p > 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

**Table 1:** Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Elderly Individuals (n=106)

Socio-demographic Characteristics	n	%
<b>Age</b>		
60-69	55	51.9
70 and above	51	48.1
<b>Gender</b>		
Women	61	57.5
Men	45	42.5
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	57	53.8
Single	49	46.2
<b>Educational status</b>		
Illiterate	14	13.2
Elementary school graduate	77	72.6
Secondary school/High school graduate	15	14.2
<b>Chronic illness state</b>		
Yes	65	61.3
No	41	38.7
<b>Birth place</b>		
City center	44	41.5
County-village	62	58.5
<b>Long-term living place</b>		
City center	61	57.5
County/village	45	42.5
<b>Having a child</b>		
Yes	99	93.4
No	7	6.6
<b>Number of children (n=99)</b>		
3 and less	43	43.5
4 and over	56	56.5
<b>Book reading (n=92)*</b>		
Yes	4	4.4
No	88	95.6
<b>Newspaper reading (n=92)*</b>		
Yes	48	52.2
No	44	47.8
<b>Follow daily news</b>		
Yes	104	98.1
No	2	1.9

\* Literate participants answered.

**Table 2.** The Average Score of the Scale of Stress-Coping Manners of the Elderly Individuals and Comparison of Descriptive Characteristics (n=106)

	Minimum	Maximum	X± SS
Score of Stress-Coping Manner	53	84	73.86±8.18
Descriptive Characteristics	n (%)	X ± SS	p
<b>Age</b>			
60-69	55 (51.9)	74.90±9.71	0.02
70 and above	51(48.1)	72.74±6.01	
<b>Gender</b>			
Women	61 (57.5)	74.85±8.99	0.04
Men	45 (42.5)	72.53±6.79	
<b>Marital status</b>			
Married	57 (53.8)	74.77±7.90	0.27
Single	49 (46.2)	72.81±8.45	
<b>Educational Status</b>			
Illiterate	14 (13.2)	69.71±7.77	0.02
Elementary school graduate	77 (72.6)	75.19±7.79	
Secondary school/High school graduate	15 (14.2)	70.93±8.97	
<b>Chronic illness state</b>			
Yes	65 (61.3)	72.63±6.91	0.00
No	41 (38.7)	75.82±9.63	
<b>Birth place</b>			
City center	44 (41.5)	75.06±10.82	0.02
County-village	62 (58.5)	73.01±5.55	
<b>Long-term living place</b>			
City center	61 (57.5)	74.37±10.02	0.02
County/village	45 (42.5)	73.17±4.67	
<b>Number of children (n=99)</b>			
3 and more	43 (43.5)	76.74±9.02	0.00
4 and more	56 (56.5)	72.16±6.99	
<b>Newspaper reading (n=92)</b>			
Yes	48 (52.2)	72.22±7.26	0.00
No	44 (47.8)	76.97±8.30	

Mann Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis test

## Discussion

The state of the elderly individuals to cope with stress is crucial for the elderly to lead a healthy life and to improve their life quality. In this research, determination of the state of the elderly individuals to cope with stress was aimed.

The SSCM score averages of the elderly individuals were estimated high in our study (Table 2). High stress-coping manner score averages of the elderly indicated that the individuals were strong enough physically and mentally and therefore they had no concerns about their health situations and their life satisfaction was good. It was reported in the conducted study that life joy and satisfaction of the elderly individuals who coped with stress was high (15). In the study of Kahraman Bayrak and Polat conducted to scrutinize healthy life style behavior of the elderly individuals, it was found that stress-management scores of the elderly individuals were low (13). In the study of Thongsomboon, it was determined that stress-management

scores of the elderly individuals were mediocre or low (16). It is thought that failure to cope with stress could be related to an increase in health and cognitive problems that depend on aging mostly. Based on these results, it is thought that stress-coping situations of the elderly individuals are assessed and appropriate attempts must be planned to prevent deterioration of their life quality due to stress.

In our study, SSCM scores of the elderly individuals in 60-69 age group were higher (Table 2). This result makes us think that stress-coping in advanced ages is more difficult for the elderly individuals due to physiological, psychological and social changes developing as advanced age. In our study, it was found that stress-coping scores of the women were higher than those of the men (Table 2). This result illustrates that emotional defense and social support due to motherhood role of women is effective in stress-coping. It is thought to cope with the difficulties of being a woman have made them more powerful. Because women have many roles in working life and social life. Nevertheless, some studies reported that men were more successful to cope with stress (17,18). Considering stress-coping state of the elderly individuals based on their educational status, stress-coping scores of the elementary school graduates were higher (Table 2). It is thought that low educational level of most of the participants in our study and their well-adaptation to aging was the reason for that.

Chronic illnesses and health problems caused by them can affect stress-coping of the elderly individuals (11). In our study, it was found that stress-coping scores of the individuals who did not have a chronic illness were higher than those of the ones who had a chronic illness (Table 2). It was thought that the reason for that was the increase of physical and mental insufficiencies and social support need of the individuals by increased chronic illnesses due to advance age. In the study of Kahraman Bayrak and Polat, it was found that the elderly individuals who did not have a chronic illness had better stress-management (13).

The stress sources related to the general environment of the individuals are crucial for elderly health as well. In our study, stress-coping scores of the elderly individuals who were born in the city and living for a long time in the city were found higher (Table 2). This result makes us think that the conveniences provided by city life for life conditions are effective on the elderly individuals to cope with stress. The meaning of living is very important for elderly individuals, when their life become more positive their life satisfaction can increase. It was reported in the studies that taking part in social activities and the feeling of being free are important elements to make sense of life, and that these factors can increase life satisfaction (19,20).

It was reported that social support was effective and important on the health behavior of individuals. Children within the family structure can be effective on diminishing of stressful life events by forming a supportive environment (21). In our study, stress-coping scores of the individuals with three and less children were higher than those of the individuals with four and more children (Table 2). This finding illustrated that having four and more children did not provide any support for the elderly individual and put different loads and led to difficulties to cope with stress. In the study of Kahraman Bayrak and Polat, a positive relationship was found between social support-receiving and stress-coping state of the elderly individuals (13). In our study, stress-coping scores of the elderly individuals who did not read

newspaper were found to be higher (Table 2). This finding makes us think that the elderly individuals coped with stress by not following up the news on daily life and staying away from stress sources. Ensuring stress-management will allow the elderly individuals for controlling stress faced during the aging process and originating from physiological and psychological changes and health problems and for leading a healthier life.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there was no problem determined regarding stress-coping of the elderly individuals in our study. It is crucial to assess the states of the individuals to cope with stress for leading a healthy life and improving life quality. Therefore, it is necessary that the coping skills of the elderly are determined by health workers and using of effective coping techniques is taught for the elderly individuals not to be affected by stress excessively and to protect their health.

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