

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND COPING STYLES IN ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS: DIFFERENTIAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH ADAPTIVE AND MALADAPTIVE COPING

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ABSTRACT

Background: Emotional intelligence has been identified as an important psychological factor influencing how individuals manage stress and regulate emotions. However, evidence regarding its differential association with adaptive and maladaptive coping styles in adolescents and young adults remains limited.

Objective: This study aimed to examine the relationships between emotional intelligence and adaptive and maladaptive coping styles in a large sample of adolescents and young adults.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 700 participants aged 15–25 years. Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale, while coping styles were measured using a 28-item COPE inventory aggregated into adaptive and maladaptive coping dimensions. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, and multiple linear regression models adjusted for age, gender, and education level were performed.

Results: Emotional intelligence was positively associated with both adaptive coping ($r = .16, p < .001$) and maladaptive coping ($r = .54, p < .001$). Regression analyses indicated that emotional intelligence independently predicted both coping styles; however, the effect size was substantially larger for maladaptive coping. Age, gender, and education level were not significant predictors in either model.

Conclusion: Emotional intelligence is differentially associated with coping styles in adolescents and young adults, with a particularly strong relationship observed for maladaptive coping. These findings underscore the importance of emotional intelligence in coping processes and suggest that interventions targeting emotional intelligence may help reduce maladaptive coping behaviors in youth.

Keywords: adaptive coping, adolescents, coping styles, emotional intelligence, maladaptive coping, young adults

INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence (EI) has emerged as a central construct in understanding how individuals perceive, regulate, and utilize emotions in everyday functioning. Conceptualized as a set of emotional abilities or traits related to emotion perception, understanding, and regulation, EI has been consistently linked to psychological adjustment, stress management, and well-being, particularly in ado-

lescent and young adult populations (Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007; Por et al., 2011; Velasco et al., 2006). During developmental periods characterized by heightened emotional reactivity and increasing psychosocial demands, such as adolescence and early adulthood, individual differences in EI may play a critical role in shaping adaptive responses to stressors.

Early conceptual and empirical work on emotional intelligence in the regional and educational context has emphasized its role as a distinct personality-related construct with relevance for emotional regulation and adaptive functioning (Pop-Jordanova, 1998; Demerdžieva et al., 2007).

Coping styles represent another key psychological domain relevant to emotional and mental health outcomes. Coping refers to the cognitive and behavioral strategies individuals employ to manage internal and external demands perceived as stressful. Broadly, coping strategies are often classified into adaptive forms, which promote problem solving and emotional regulation, and maladaptive forms, which involve avoidance, disengagement, or ineffective emotional responses (Enns et al., 2018; Ke & Barlas, 2020). Research among student populations has demonstrated that coping styles are closely associated with perceived stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and academic functioning (Aradilla-Herrero et al., 2014; Augusto-Landa et al., 2024; Khorasani et al., 2023; Shengyao et al., 2024).

A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that emotional intelligence is an important predictor of how individuals cope with stress. Higher EI has generally been associated with greater use of adaptive coping strategies and more effective emotional regulation, whereas lower EI has been linked to avoidant or maladaptive coping patterns (Alconero-Camarero et al., 2018; Enns et al., 2018; Por et al., 2011). Studies in nursing and medical students have shown that EI is inversely related to perceived stress and psychological distress, while positively related to learning satisfaction, academic motivation, and resilience (Li et al., 2015; González-Yubero et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Longitudinal and intervention-based research further supports the role of EI as a modifiable factor influencing coping and psychological outcomes over time (Dang et al., 2019; Jung et al., 2016). Research in student populations has further demonstrated meaningful associations between emotional intelligence, personality traits, and alexithymia, suggesting that emotional intelligence operates within a broader personality and emotion-regulation framework (Pop-Jordanova & Stojmenova-Canevska, 2014; Pop-Jordanova, 2014).

Importantly, recent research has emphasized that the relationship between EI and coping is not uniform across coping domains. Trait emotional intelligence has been shown to differentially relate to adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies, with

stronger associations often observed for maladaptive or emotion-dysregulation-based coping patterns (Ke & Barlas, 2020; Mikolajczak et al., 2009). This distinction is particularly relevant in youth populations, where maladaptive coping behaviors may contribute to long-term mental health vulnerability, including anxiety, stress-related disorders, and maladaptive emotion regulation strategies (Sulejmani & Pop-Jordanova, 2025b; Sulejmani & Pop-Jordanova, 2025c). Furthermore, contextual and cultural factors, such as exposure to high-stress environments or sociopolitical instability, may interact with EI and coping processes, as observed in recent studies among students exposed to extreme stressors (Koliadenko et al., 2024).

Despite the growing literature, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus predominantly on stress or well-being outcomes without explicitly distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive coping styles. Second, findings regarding the magnitude of associations between EI and different coping dimensions are mixed, particularly in non-clinical adolescent and young adult samples. Third, much of the existing research is context-specific, focusing on healthcare or professional training populations, highlighting the need for broader investigations across educational settings (Bayraktar & Battal, 2025; Perry et al., 2020; Nabirye et al., 2025; Hathurusinghe & Dassanayake, 2025).

Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine the associations between emotional intelligence and coping styles in a large sample of adolescents and young adults, with particular emphasis on distinguishing between adaptive and maladaptive coping. By integrating correlational and multivariable analyses while accounting for key sociodemographic factors, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the role of emotional intelligence in coping processes during a critical developmental period.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional quantitative design to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and coping styles. A total of 700 participants were included in the final analysis. Participants were aged between 15 and 25 years and were recruited through educational institutions. Participation was voluntary,

and data collection was conducted anonymously to ensure confidentiality.

Data were collected through in-person administration of paper-based questionnaires distributed to high school students and university students during regular school or lecture hours, with prior approval from the respective institutions. Participants completed the questionnaires individually in a classroom setting under the supervision of a member of the research team or a designated teacher. All participants were informed about the voluntary nature of the study and the anonymity of their responses before completing the questionnaires.

Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and subsequently entered manually into a Microsoft Excel database by the research team. Data entry was performed carefully to ensure accuracy, after which the dataset was reviewed for missing or inconsistent values prior to statistical analysis.

Eligibility criteria included age within the specified range and completion of all relevant study measures. Participants with incomplete responses on key variables were excluded prior to analysis. The final sample consisted of both male and female participants and included individuals with either high school or university-level education.

Measures

Emotional intelligence was assessed using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), a validated self-report instrument consisting of 16 items designed to measure global emotional intelligence. The scale captures multiple dimensions of emotional functioning, including self-emotion appraisal, others' emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and emotion regulation. Responses are recorded on a Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of emotional intelligence. In the present study, a total emotional intelligence score was calculated by averaging responses across all items. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample, as indicated by Cronbach's alpha.

Coping styles were measured using a 28-item version of the COPE inventory, which assesses a broad range of cognitive and behavioral strategies used in response to stress. Based on established conceptual frameworks, individual coping strategies were aggregated into two high-

er-order dimensions representing adaptive coping and maladaptive coping. Mean scores were calculated for each coping dimension, with higher scores reflecting greater use of the respective coping style.

Sociodemographic Variables

Participants provided basic sociodemographic information, including age, gender, and education level. Gender was recorded as male or female, and education level was categorized as high school or university education. These variables were included as covariates in inferential analyses due to their potential associations with emotional intelligence and coping behaviors.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using standard parametric procedures. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize sociodemographic characteristics and study variables, including means, standard deviations, and score ranges. Internal consistency of the emotional intelligence scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha.

Associations between emotional intelligence and coping styles were examined using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients. Multiple linear regression analyses were subsequently performed to evaluate whether emotional intelligence predicted adaptive and maladaptive coping while controlling for age, gender, and education level. Separate models were estimated for each coping outcome, and model fit was evaluated using R^2 , adjusted R^2 , and F-statistics. Statistical significance was set at $p < .001$.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving human participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study. No personally identifiable information was collected or stored.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics, reliability, and inferential analyses were conducted to examine

emotional intelligence, coping styles, and their interrelationships. Associations were first explored using bivariate correlations, followed by multivariable regression models adjusting for age, gender, and education level.

The study included 700 participants with a mean age of 18.98 years ($SD = 3.00$; range 15–25). The sample consisted predominantly of females (60.0%), while males comprised 40.0% of the participants. Education level was evenly distributed, with half of the participants having completed high school education and half having a university-level education. Detailed sociodemographic and psychological characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Detailed descriptive statistics, including score ranges, for emotional intelligence, adaptive coping, and maladaptive coping are presented in Table 2. Emotional intelligence scores demonstrated a wide distribution, while coping style scores showed moderate variability across participants.

The Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) demonstrated excellent internal con-

sistency in the present sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$; Table 5).

Pearson correlation analyses revealed a small but significant positive association between emotional intelligence and adaptive coping, and a strong positive association between emotional intelligence and maladaptive coping (Table 3). Adaptive and maladaptive coping were also significantly correlated.

Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine whether emotional intelligence independently predicted adaptive and maladaptive coping after controlling for age, gender, and education level (Table 4). Emotional intelligence emerged as a significant predictor in both models, with a substantially larger effect observed for maladaptive coping. Demographic variables were not significant predictors in either model.

Graphical representations were used to visually complement the tabulated results and illustrate key associations.

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of emotional intelligence, adaptive coping, and maladaptive coping scores, demonstrating approximately normal distributions with no marked floor or ceiling effects.

Figure 2 presents group differences in emotional intelligence by education level and adaptive coping by gender. Visual inspection indicates modest group differences, consistent with the nonsignificant effects observed in regression analyses.

Table 1. Sociodemographic and Psychological Characteristics of the Study Sample ($N = 700$)

Variable	n (%) or Mean $\pm$ SD
Age (years)	18.98 $\pm$ 3.00 (15–25)
Gender	
Female	420 (60.0%)
Male	280 (40.0%)
Education level	
High school	350 (50.0%)
University	350 (50.0%)
Emotional Intelligence (total score)	4.06 $\pm$ 0.90
Adaptive Coping	2.50 $\pm$ 0.31
Maladaptive Coping	2.52 $\pm$ 0.36

Note. Values are presented as mean $\pm$ standard deviation for continuous variables and frequency (percentage) for categorical variables.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables ($N = 700$)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	4.06	0.90	1.88	6.38
Adaptive Coping	2.50	0.31	1.67	3.44
Maladaptive Coping	2.52	0.36	1.50	3.50

Note. Values represent means and standard deviations. Higher scores indicate higher levels of the respective construct.

Table 3. *Pearson Correlation Matrix Between Emotional Intelligence and Coping Styles (N = 700)*

Variable	Emotional Intelligence	Adaptive Coping	Maladaptive Coping
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	1.00	0.16***	0.54***
Adaptive Coping	0.16***	1.00	0.52***
Maladaptive Coping	0.54***	0.52***	1.00

Note. Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients (r).

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. *Multiple Linear Regression Models Predicting Adaptive and Maladaptive Coping (N = 700)*

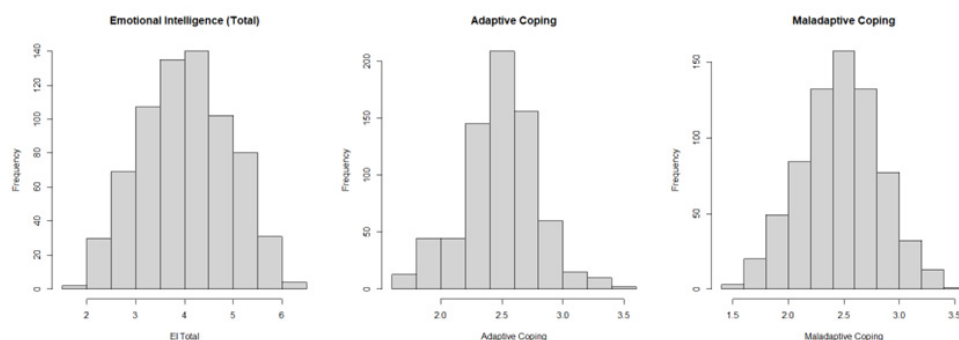
Predictor	Adaptive Coping B (SE)	t	p	Maladaptive Coping B (SE)	t	p
Intercept	2.30 (0.12)	18.92	< .001	1.63 (0.12)	13.70	< .001
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	0.06 (0.01)	4.27	< .001	0.22 (0.01)	16.80	< .001
Age	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.53	.594	0.00 (0.01)	0.06	.953
Gender (Male)	0.04 (0.02)	1.69	.092	0.03 (0.02)	1.18	.239
Education Level (University)	0.04 (0.04)	0.92	.359	0.00 (0.04)	0.10	.920

Model statistics: Adaptive Coping: $R^2 = .03$, Adjusted $R^2 = .03$, $F(4, 695) = 5.58$, $p < .001$, **Maladaptive Coping:** $R^2 = .29$, Adjusted $R^2 = .29$, $F(4, 695) = 71.80$, $p < .001$

Table 5. *Internal Consistency of the Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS)*

Scale	Cronbach's α	Number of Items
Emotional Intelligence (Total)	0.93	16

Note. Cronbach's alpha values above .70 indicate acceptable reliability; values above .90 indicate excellent internal consistency.

**Figure 1.** *Distributions of emotional intelligence, adaptive coping, and maladaptive coping scores*

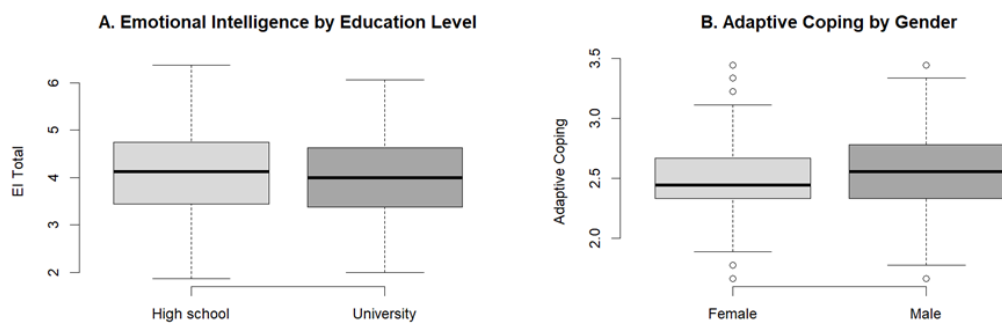


Figure 2. Group differences in emotional intelligence and adaptive coping by education level and gender

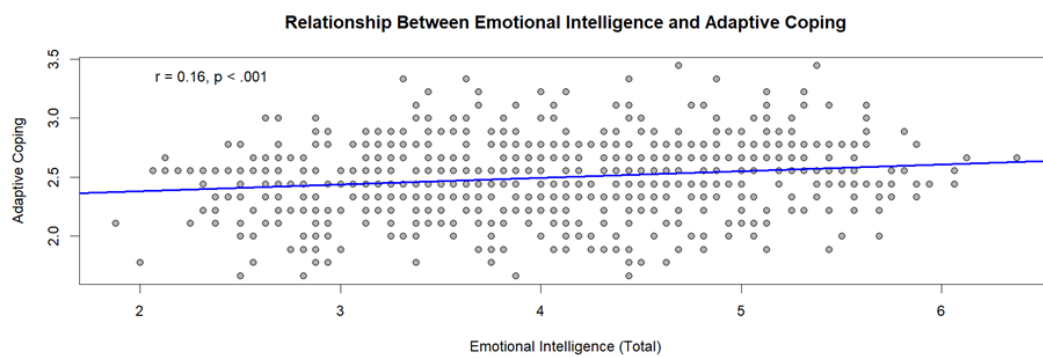


Figure 3. Relationship between emotional intelligence and adaptive coping

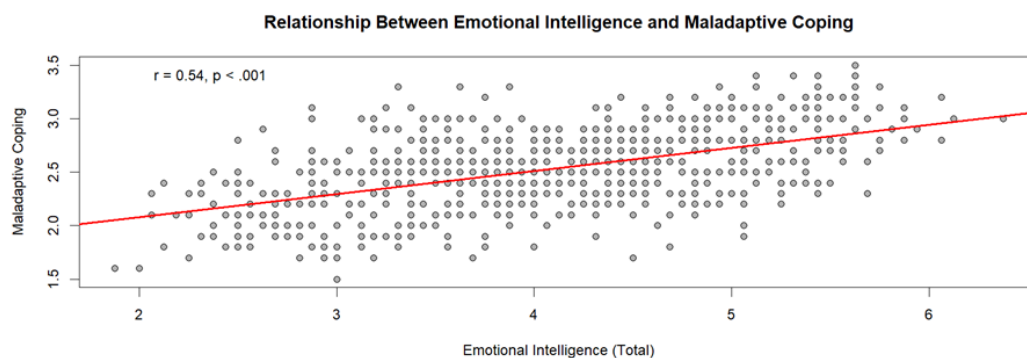


Figure 4. Relationship between emotional intelligence and maladaptive coping

As shown in Figure 3, emotional intelligence was positively associated with adaptive coping, though the magnitude of the relationship was small.

Figure 4 demonstrates a strong positive association between emotional intelligence and maladaptive coping, consistent with both correlation and regression findings.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and coping styles in a sample of adolescents and young adults. Consistent with prior research,

emotional intelligence was positively associated with both adaptive and maladaptive coping; however, the magnitude of the association was substantially stronger for maladaptive coping. This pattern persisted after controlling for age, gender, and education level, underscoring emotional intelligence as an independent predictor of coping behavior.

The observed positive association between emotional intelligence and adaptive coping aligns with a substantial body of literature demonstrating that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to employ more constructive and problem-focused coping strategies (Alconero-Camarero et al., 2018; Enns et al., 2018; Por et al., 2011). Emotionally intelligent individuals are thought to possess enhanced capacities for emotional awareness, regulation, and strategic emotional use, which may facilitate adaptive responses to stressors encountered in academic and social contexts (Montes-Berges & Augusto, 2007; Velasco et al., 2006). Similar associations have been reported in university students, where higher EI has been linked to lower perceived stress and improved psychological adjustment (Frazier et al., 2020; Khorasani et al., 2023; Shengyao et al., 2024).

The present findings are also consistent with earlier regional studies indicating that emotional intelligence is closely linked to emotion regulation capacities and personality structure among students and healthcare professionals (Pop-Jordanova, 1998; Demerdžieva et al., 2007; Pop-Jordanova & Stojmenova-Canevska, 2014).

Notably, the stronger association between emotional intelligence and maladaptive coping observed in the present study provides important insight into the role of EI in emotion regulation processes. Previous research has suggested that low emotional intelligence may be particularly relevant in the context of maladaptive coping strategies, such as avoidance, emotional disengagement, and ineffective regulation of distress (Ke & Barlas, 2020; Mikolajczak et al., 2009). These findings are consistent with theoretical models proposing that deficits in emotional understanding and regulation increase vulnerability to maladaptive coping responses, especially under conditions of heightened stress or emotional demand.

This interpretation is further supported by studies demonstrating that maladaptive coping mediates the relationship between emotional in-

telligence and adverse psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and stress-related symptoms (Augusto-Landa et al., 2024; Aradilla-Herrero et al., 2014). Research focusing on youth mental health has similarly emphasized the importance of emotion regulation capacities in preventing reliance on maladaptive coping strategies during adolescence (Sulejmani & Pop-Jordanova, 2025b; Sulejmani & Pop-Jordanova, 2025c). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that emotional intelligence may be more strongly implicated in the reduction of maladaptive coping than in the promotion of adaptive strategies *per se*.

The lack of significant effects for demographic variables in the regression models suggests that emotional intelligence exerts a robust influence on coping styles across gender and educational levels within this age group. While some studies have reported gender differences in EI and coping patterns (Zhang et al., 2024), others have found minimal or inconsistent demographic effects once emotional variables are accounted for (Enns et al., 2018; González-Yubero et al., 2025). These findings support the notion that emotional intelligence represents a core psychological resource that transcends basic socio-demographic characteristics.

From a practical perspective, the present results have important implications for educational and preventive interventions. Programs aimed at enhancing emotional intelligence may contribute not only to the increased use of adaptive coping strategies but, critically, to a reduction in maladaptive coping behaviors that are associated with long-term psychological risk. This is particularly relevant in educational and training environments characterized by high emotional demands, such as in healthcare education and professional preparation programs (Alconero-Camarero et al., 2018; Nabirye et al., 2025; Perry et al., 2020). Intervention-based studies have already demonstrated that EI-focused training can improve coping, resilience, and emotional well-being (Jung et al., 2016; Bayraktar & Battal, 2025), suggesting that EI may represent a modifiable target for early psychological intervention.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and reliance on self-report measures may introduce response biases. Additionally, while the sample size was large, the

findings may not generalize to clinical populations or individuals exposed to extreme stressors, such as those affected by conflict or trauma (Koliadenko et al., 2024). Future research employing longitudinal designs and multi-method assessment approaches would help clarify the temporal dynamics between emotional intelligence and coping strategies.

In conclusion, the present study provides robust evidence that emotional intelligence is differentially associated with coping styles in adolescents and young adults, with a particularly strong relationship observed for maladaptive coping. These findings highlight the importance of emotional intelligence as a key psychological factor in coping processes and underscore its potential role in promoting emotional resilience and mental health during a critical developmental period.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that emotional intelligence is significantly associated with coping styles in adolescents and young adults, with a notably stronger relationship observed for maladaptive coping. These findings suggest that emotional intelligence may be particularly important in reducing reliance on ineffective coping strategies rather than solely enhancing adaptive coping.

The results highlight emotional intelligence as a key psychological factor in coping processes during a critical developmental period and support its relevance across demographic groups. Interventions aimed at strengthening emotional intelligence may therefore contribute to improved emotional regulation and reduced vulnerability to stress-related difficulties in youth.

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Резиме

ЕМОЦИОНАЛНАТА ИНТЕЛИГЕНЦИЈА И СТИЛОВИТЕ НА СПРАВУВАЊЕ КАЈ АДОЛЕСЦЕНТИТЕ И КАЈ МЛАДИТЕ ВОЗРАСНИ: ДИФЕРЕНЦИЈАЛНИ АСОЦИЈАЦИИ СО АДАПТИВНО И СО МАЛАДАПТИВНО СПРАВУВАЊЕ

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Вовед: Емоционалната интелигенција е препознаена како значаен психолошки фактор што влијае врз начинот на кој поединците се справуваат со стресот и ги регулираат емоциите. Сепак, доказите за нејзината диференцијална поврзаност со адаптивните и со маладаптивните стилови на справување кај адолесцентите кај младите возрасни сè уште се ограничени.

Цел: Целта на ова истражување беше да се испита поврзаноста меѓу емоционалната интелигенција и адаптивните и маладаптивните стилови на справување кај голем примерок адолесценти и млади возрасни.

Методи: Спроведено е пресечно истражување со вкупно 700 испитаници на возраст од 15 до 25 години. Емоционалната интелигенција беше проценета со Скалата за емоционална интелигенција на Вонг и Ло, додека стиловите на справување беа измерени со прашалникот COPE од 28 ставки, агрегирани во адаптивна и во маладаптивна димензија. Применети беа дескриптивна статистика, Пирсонова корелациска анализа и мултипли регресиски модели приспособени според возраста, полот и нивото на образованието.

Резултати: Емоционалната интелигенција покажа позитивна поврзаност и со адаптивното справување ($r = 0,16$; $p < 0,001$) и со маладаптивното справување ($r = 0,54$; $p < 0,001$). Регресиските анализи покажаа дека емоционалната интелигенција е независен предиктор за двата типа стилови на справување, при што ефектот беше значително поизразен кај маладаптивното справување. Возраста, полот и образовното ниво не покажаа статистички значајно влијание во ниту еден од моделите.

Заклучок: Емоционалната интелигенција е диференцијално поврзана со стиловите на справување кај адолесцентите и кај младите возрасни, со особено силна поврзаност со маладаптивното справување. Овие наоди ја нагласуваат важноста на емоционалната интелигенција во процесите на справување и укажуваат дека интервенции насочени кон нејзино унапредување може да придонесат за намалување на маладаптивните облици на справување кај младата популација.

Клучни зборови: адаптивно справување, адолесценти, стилови на справување, емоционална интелигенција, маладаптивно справување, млади возрасни