

PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK FACTORS OF SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG ACID ATTACK SURVIVORS IN PAKISTAN: A THEMATIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the psychological risk factors of suicidal ideation among acid attack survivors in Pakistan. Through purposive sampling, interview responses of sixteen acid attack survivors with the age range between 18-45 years, who had experienced this incident within the past 3 years were qualitatively analyzed. The sample was collected from Lahore, Multan, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, and Faisalabad. For the analysis and interpretation of the data thematic analysis was used as it provides in-depth information of the research. The results indicated that the psychological risk factors common among acid attack survivors with suicidal ideation include depression, low self-esteem, perceived stigma, and PTSD. The emergent subthemes were hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, inadequacy, lack of family support, self-hatred, worthlessness and being a burden on others. The coping strategies that emerged are emotion focused coping, problem focused coping and religious coping. As one of the few studies looking into the psychological factors risking suicidal tendencies in an often-overlooked population, the study offers guidance for future intervention plans for preventing suicidal tendencies among acid attack survivors in Pakistan. Practical implications for practitioners and future research directions for scholars are also discussed.

Keywords: Acid attack survivors, qualitative research, thematic analysis, psychological risk factors, suicidal ideation

INTRODUCTION

'if one is unable to eat anywhere, is not able to dress properly, when is looked down upon in contempt, its better to die to have such life ' what type of a life is this, its better to end this life'
(T, 22, acid attack survivor)

Acid throwing is a heinous act that destroys the life of the victim in all aspects. The major cause of acid throwing is to inflict severe pain including physical as well as mental on the victims. It is common in many countries where the act of domestic violence is very prevalent. The effects of violence include serious physical harm and victims are disfigured for their entire life and suffer from psychological trauma along with being ostracized not only by the people of the society but also by their relatives and immediate family members. Though acid attack is a global phenomenon (Begum, 2021) but it is considered to be an act which is mostly thought of being related to the developing countries or has been associated with the subcontinent region (Krishnan, 2020). Acid violence is a universal issue, and it is widespread misinterpretation that attacks are restricted to the Indian sub-continent or that perpetrators are Islamic fundamentalists who are penalizing women not following and behaving beyond the spheres of what is believed to be a simple behavior. On the opposing side different research have signified that these attacks are being conducted by many nationalities and are not restricted by race, religion, belief, and location (Vaughn, 2011).

Acid attack is the intentional throwing of acid on the victim. Mostly women and children are facing acid violence in Pakistan (Bates & Khan, 2015) . Most of the cases go unreported because these cases are not registered by their family members. In order to understand the phenomenon of this type

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of violence one must have good understanding about violence against women. Its various forms prevailing in Pakistan as well as rest of the world (ASF, 2010). United Nations International Children Emergency Fund (2000) defines acid violence 'as an act of acid throwing on a person which results in a attempt to disfigure the body'. There are several reasons which can lead to acid attacks. Sulphuric acid is universally being the basic inexpensive ingredient for making lead acid batteries in all motor vehicles all over the world. There does not appear to any way of reducing its availability because of its easy availability.

Acid throwing is usually inflicted on women in Pakistan (Jatt, 2022). Acid attack is at its rise in Pakistan (Nigwari, 2021). Statistics of acid attack violence against women in Pakistan reported that there are 53 cases of acid throwing in the years 2018-2020. Though the acid attack cases have reduced after the bill has been passed but the number still exists. The violence involves the act of harming the victim physically as well as emotionally and includes the acid throwing when the victim does not follow what the preparator is asking to do (Patel, 2014).

Domestic abuse, refusal of marriage proposals, sexually harassing, rejection, etc. are the most frequent causes of such attacks (Ismail et al. 2020). The purpose of acid throwing is usually because of the disfiguring the face of the victim (Asif, et al., 2022) due to many reasons with an intent to disfigure the body especially the face of the victim (usually women) to take revenge for her refusing the what the perpetrator wants (Noor, 2022) . Racial and cultural reasons especially in Pakistan include failure of a girl to bring dowry, not wanting to pay the haq mehr, political rivalries, and land disputes. Such attacks may be sudden causing problems for the victim and in most cases even causing death. Several cases have been reported on the transgenders community but usually go unreported (Fatima et al. 2022). Acid attacks are deliberate because the perpetrator first obtains the acid, carries it with him/her and stalks the victim before executing the act. This leads to many problems for the survivors.

Acid Attacks global phenomenon

Acid attacks are alarmingly prevalent across the globe. It is a dreadful crime which involves the throwing of acid on the victim with the intention of killing, harming, disfiguring the victim. As reported by Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) United Kingdom has the highest rates of acid attacks in the world, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan following it. It is a global phenomenon. According to a research conducted in Cambodia indicated that acid throwing is more prevalent because it is easily available letting preparators to have an easy access of it (Khantey, 2019). It leads to not only body disfigurement but also damages the psychological and social life of the victims.

Gender based violence in Pakistan

Violence being the extreme form of aggression persists across the globe. Gender based violence is defined as any act which would result in physical, psychological, or sexual harm to the females preventing the victims of the basic human rights, freedom, and anonymity (Sarfraz et al. 2022). Being a patriarchal society, women in Pakistan have to go through such violence on daily basis making it more prevalent in Pakistan. To control this Domestic violence Act 2020 has been introduced by the National assemble on the 8th of July 2020. It aims to establish effective strategies for the protection for women, elderly and the children who are susceptible to any form of domestic violence. Acid attacks is one form of domestic violence It has risen in Pakistan due to the easy and cheap availability of acids. According to ASTI it is a hidden form of violence due to which it often goes unreported.

Acid Attacks in Pakistan, cultural and structural factors

The act of acid throwing is a common threat woman in Pakistan must face. According to the Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) 80 percent of the women are the victims of this heinous act making it one of the most prevalent gender-based violence in Pakistan.

The acid and Burn Crimes Bill in 2018 were introduced to legally criminalize the act. A decline has been noticed in the number of cases reported since 2018. According to the ASTI report almost 85 percent of the cases reported are from the Punjab mostly from the southern Punjab which was followed by Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Islamabad, and Kashmir.

The psychological impact of acid attacks

Acid attacks have a very strong impact on the survivors. Survivors have many psychological effects like social isolation, suicidal plans, and eternal trauma (Azam, 2014). They also face psychological distress, loss of identity and are depressed which also effects their interpersonal relationships (Zalmi & Amiri, 2021).

Rationale of the study

Acid attacks are the most serious crimes inflicted on the survivors. The present study aims to study risk factors which lead an acid attack survivor towards suicidal ideation and what their coping mechanisms are in dealing with such of acid attack survivors, different causes as to why this crime is committed in Pakistan. This study also aims to identify various ways in which the victims coped after the incident.

Research Questions

- 1) What are the psychological risk factors of suicidal ideation among acid attack survivors?
- 2) What are the coping strategies used by acid attack survivors?

METHODS

Population and Sample

The study focused on suicidal ideation among acid attack survivors in Pakistan. Geographically, acid attacks and their survivors are dispersed across the country, with most incidents happening in far flung areas, although acid attacks in bigger cities are not unheard of either. The study comprised of 11 female and 4 transgender acid attack survivors selected through purposive sampling, from Depilex Smile Again Foundation in Lahore. Although the study was not restricted to any gender, given that acid attacks are overwhelmingly done by male relatives and acquaintances on females and by acquaintances or strangers on transgenders, this gender disparity in the study sample was not surprising. During the study, the researchers found no male acid attack survivors, and the two well-known institutes for rehabilitation of acid attack survivors contacted by the researchers reported no such incident.

Procedure

The researchers contacted foundations working for the treatment and rehabilitation of acid attack victims in Pakistan through email. The emails explicitly mentioned the study objectives and nature of the interview questions. Upon receiving an affirmative response from one of the foundations, an initial meeting date and time was mutually decided for the interviews. Other foundation cited confidentiality and COVID-19 concerns for refusing to arrange interviews. Data collection for research is challenging in Pakistan owing to lack of awareness regarding research and general indifference. This limits researchers' options for data collection for topics as troublesome as acid attacks.

Through purposive sampling, data were collected from acid attack survivors through semi-structured interviews October 2021 through January 2022. Interviews were arranged at Depilex smile again foundation (DSF), a non-profit organization. The researchers sought respondents' informed consent by reading the script aloud (most of the participants were illiterate). The respondents were ensured of the confidentiality of any information provided, and the study objectives were briefly explained. During the interviews, the researchers recorded session narratives for future reference, and pseudo names were assigned in reporting the findings for maintaining respondent integrity.

Analysis Scheme

The study used the thematic analysis scheme commonly used for similar objectives of identifying common themes in interviewee responses (Braun & Clarke, 2008). The recorded interviews and interviewer notes were transcribed and coded. In the first stage, the researchers identified potential themes and coding them, through an analysis of the transcribed data. The second stage involved reviewing the codes, and retaining those themes relevant to the research question. In the third stage, interviewee responses congruent with the identified themes were retained and named.

An overview of the responses by the 20 acid attack survivors showed that 15 mentioned suicidal ideation, while no suicidal ideation emerged for 5 acid attack survivors. In keeping with the study objectives, responses of the 15 respondents reporting suicidal ideation were analyzed for psychological risk factors. Demographic analysis of the 15 respondents are reported in table 1. The respondents included an overwhelming majority of females (11), with 4 transgenders. Most respondents were in the age bracket 26-36, were illiterate, unmarried, and were attacked by husbands or in-laws in the presence of their husbands.

Table No. 1 Sample demographics (N=15)

Demographics	Number	%
Gender		
Female	11	73%
Transgender	4	26%
Age		
15-25	4	26%
26-36	9	60%
37-47	2	13%
Education		
Illiterate	8	53%
Primary	7	47%
Marital Status		
Unmarried	9	60%
Married	6	40%
Perpetrator		
Husband	7	46%
Father	1	6%
In-laws	3	20%
Landlord's son	1	6%
Acquaintance	3	20%

Authors proceeded with thematic analysis of the interviewee responses by transcribing the responses, then by identifying common themes. A translated version of the responses that helped identify suicidal tendencies or earlier suicide attempts among the sample (n=15), are mentioned in Table 2. Other common themes were identified based on similar nature of responses that emerged over the respondents.

Table No. 2 Literal translation of suicidal ideation statements

Literal translation of responses indicating suicidal ideation	
Suicidal ideation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>'if one is unable to eat anywhere, is not able to dress properly, when is looked down upon in contempt, its better to die to have such life ' what type of a life is this, its better to end this life'</i> • <i>'it would have been better if Allah would have killed me then to live such a life''.</i> • <i>'I also had thoughts of committing suicide'</i> • <i>'I feel like killing myself and ending my life'.</i> • <i>'Sometimes I feel like taking my life'</i> • <i>'Sometimes I wish I had died the day I was attacked, I would not have to face such difficulties'.</i> • <i>'If it were not for my son, I would have ended my life'.</i> • <i>'I would have died but then I worry for my son'.</i>

Results and Discussion

Upon following the recommended stages of thematic analysis involving transcribing, coding, and identifying themes, the following set of themes emerged. All respondent statements mentioned are literal translations of their responses, as the interviews were conducted in Urdu.

Theme 1. Depression

Based on literature, a number of sub-themes identified from the responses fell under the major theme depression. Almost all respondents reported feelings categorized under sub-themes that were included in the major theme depression. The respondents seemed overwhelmed with the acid attack itself and the life events that unfolded following the incident. Their tone of voice, bodily gestures, avoiding eye contact were additional indicators of depressive symptoms or their onset. In line with previous researches there is high level depression in the people who have gone through acid attack survivors

especially in people who have low family care and assistance than in people who have higher levels of support from their family and friends (Zulfiqar et al. 2021). They also have depression because of the challenges they have to face after the burn injuries (Chokshi et al. 2022). Because of the challenges they must face after the burn its normal that they can go under depression.

Based on the literature review, the identified sub-themes that the researchers placed under the common theme 'depression' are mentioned below.

Hopelessness

Respondents gave statements indicating lack of hope for the future, perceived uselessness of themselves as individuals or of their lives, lack of hope in securing a livelihood due to facial and/or physical deformities resulting from the acid attack, and lack of choice in being forced to accept the lifestyle that they had not envisioned. For example, one of the respondents stated the following:

'mother asks to do something (for earning) I tell her what am I supposed to do with this (deformed) face (while pointing to her face)'. (R3)

Another respondent stated:

'What can I do with this face? Who will marry me? Who will give me a job?' (R 14)

These and other statements in table 3 show hopelessness about marriage, earning a livelihood, and life goals are common among acid attack survivors. Given that feelings of hopelessness such as those reported by respondents (recurring thoughts and/or feelings of hopelessness), are common symptoms of depression this sub-theme fits well with the major theme 'depression'.

Helplessness

Since a common symptom of depression or depressive episodes are behaviors or attitudes indicating lack of will power, reduced interest in life and/ or situations that were otherwise of interest to the individual, loss of energy, and willingness to participate in common life events and daily rituals, the common sub-theme associated with these feelings was categorized under the major theme depression.

One of the respondent stated :

'It is better to die then to face this embarrassment'.

While the above statement may be interpreted as falling under the general theme of the study suicidal ideation, upon close analysis, it indicates feeling embarrassment and hopelessness in facing difficulties of life the acid attack has exposed them to. Although it indicates a willingness to die, it is also indicative of hopelessness, which is a common correlate of suicidal ideation and depression.

Another respondent stated:

'I am just spending the days of my life'.

By indicating the respondent's lack of agency in the events and circumstances in her life, displeasure coupled with lack of control over her life, is indicative of helplessness. Hopelessness such as believing life is happening to oneself, rather than believing one is living their life is a common indicator of depression.

Loneliness

Loneliness emerged as another theme, as respondents stated:

'I feel very lonely'. (R1)

'I have started to feel very alone' (R3)

'One has to carry the burden of life all alone'(R1)

These statements reflect the idea that it is not uncommon among acid attack survivors to feel lonely. Loneliness or the perceived burden of having to go through difficulties of life without someone to share it with is a common symptom of depression.

'When I used to live with my brothers they used to often have a fight(thinking im a burden on them. 'My brothers unwillingly spent money on me, but as the family members asked them to help as I was their sister.... They did'. (R3)

Previous research have also indicated that survivors of burn injuries have depression and anxiety that leads towards body dissatisfaction which results in people not being with others (Azhaar, Anwaar, Dawood, Ali, & Shoaib, 2020). As one of the survivors reported that when nobody in the family supported her and she was alone because of the way people talked to her she felt herself to be alone and there was none she could talk to about her problems.

Inadequacy

Given that depression commonly also involves feelings of inadequacy in general capabilities to perform routine tasks, let alone undertake professional endeavors, the following statements reflecting inadequacy indicate another psychological factor common among the depressed.

'I don't feel like doing anything. I just want to be left alone and don't want to do anything'.

Likewise, another respondent mentioned that they do not feel motivated to do anything or perform any daily task.

'I cant do anything'

Another respondent mentioned the same lack of motivation and inability for work.

'I am unable to work anywhere.'

The above statements from the respondents reflect inadequacy in performing routine activities, or in working towards supporting themselves economically.

Lack of family support

Another emergent theme had to do with social or family support. The following statement by a respondent shows family support only after the family was socially pressured into doing so.

'When I used to live with my brothers they used to often have a fight (thinking I'm a burden on them. 'my brothers unwillingly spent money on me, but as the family members asked them to help as I was their sister.... They did'.

Theme 2: Low Self Esteem

Another major theme that emerged was that of having low self-esteem. The respondents had low confidence in their sense of worth and their abilities. Based on literature the following sub-themes have been identified and placed under the major theme of low self esteem.

Self-hatred

Self-hatred was mostly reported by the respondents which had developed after the incident. self-hatred involves the feelings of self-loathing which is indicated by the following statements given by the respondents.

'One does think of how one has come (for a job) with such a face'. (R1)

The 5th of the respondents reported that they were not able to go for a job because of their facial deformity. They felt embarrassed of how they looked like. Another respondent shared her experience of hating herself and not looking into the mirror because of her mal formed face. As she reported:

'I have started hating myself....who would like all this?'(R12)

'I cannot go anywhere with this face of mine.'(R10)

They felt like they don't belong with the rest of the people considering themselves to be strange and weird. As reported:

'I find myself strange and weird.' (R2)

'I have a weird face.'(R1)

Since women are considered to be a symbol of beauty (Givhan & Morales, 2020) it is difficult not to have her in her best looks. After the incident it becomes very difficult for them to face the world resulting in low self-esteem.

Worthlessness

Another subtheme was that of worthlessness . being in desperation an acid attack survivors has no hope of the future. They feel weak and have no expectation. As reported by an acid attack survivor:

'I don't feel like getting ready..... its of no use and interest to me..... because relatives talk about me.'

Another acid attack survivor reported:

'I have become very weak'.

Burden on others

The respondents reported that since they were not able to go out , work and earn they considered themselves to be a burden on others especially on their family members. As reported by one of the respondent :

' my mother works in others peoples houses to support me and my son..... it feels like im a burden on her....for how long will she support merather than being a burden on her its better that Allah finishes me (kills me)'. (R3)

Another respondent who was an uneducated transgender and whose only way of earning was to dance in different functions reported:

'the only way I used to earn was that I used to go and perform (dance) in different functions...this was my only way of earning. Now my father has to go and earn for me....instead of I helping him in his old age he has to earn for me..... It feels like im a burden on him'. (R1)

Likewise, another 17 years old female respondent who along her mother was living with her uncle also felt the same since she might not be able to work with her deformed face and hands she was a burden on her uncle. As she reported:

'What father has done to us is completely unforgivable... when people stare at me it feels like it's no use being alive and being a burden on others (uncle)'. (R6)

Similarly, one of the respondents reported of being a burden on her father.

'I wouldn't have been alive without the help of my father. He bares all my expenses because I cannot go out like this.' (R 11)

Theme 3: Perceived Stigma

Acid attack survivors have to face the people of the society which is completely different than they used to before the incident. There is a lot of stigma attached to the people who have gone through acid attacks. The victims also perceive themselves as a mark of disgrace towards their family. They avoid going out and meet people and remain in isolation. As reported by an acid attack survivor:

'Everyone is afraid of me'. (R1)

'People ask me questions about my present condition'. (R2)

'I usually don't go out, if I do people ask me many weird questions about me and the incident that has happened to me which I feel bad about'. (R4)

'Sometimes I answer them and sometimes I get annoyed. When you (people) can see my situation then why do you have to further probe questions and freshen my wounds.'(R5)
; people look at me with hatred'.(R14)

Theme 4: Posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms

According to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association, 2022) Post traumatic Stress Disorder is defined as the psychological distress after the exposure to a traumatic event for a long period of time which causes disturbances in the psychological functioning of a person. Acid attack survivors also reported of symptoms which are related with PTSD. The survivors reported of having flashbacks and nightmares about the incident resulting in the fear that the event might occur again. The flashbacks compelled them not to leave the house. One of the respondents reported that from the time the incident had occurred there was not a single day or night she had turned off the lights because she feared that the perpetrator might be hiding somewhere in the house. Presence of PTSD is also supported by previous research. In a clinical review it is stated that PTSD is one of the major psychological problems seen in burn survivors which is the result of the incident itself and the social factors related to the survivors (Lodha et al., 2020). PTSD also causes adjustment problems in burn survivors (Byrant, 1996). But resilience is found to be negatively correlated with PTSD symptoms among burn survivors (Bibi et al., 2018). The more resilient an individual is the more the chances are the person will not have the PTSD symptoms.

Coping mechanisms

Suffering from a traumatic experience hinders an individual's ability to adjust with life. one who is going through such experience therefore uses different coping mechanisms to overcome their problems of life with the burden of having such a trauma. Similarly, one of the most heinous experiences of being attacked by acid leaves the sufferer in a horrendous situation. They therefore use different coping mechanisms to face this tough reality of life. The researcher also identified various coping mechanisms used by the acid attack survivors. By reviewing the literature, the subthemes of coping mechanisms that were generated are religious coping, problem focused coping and emotion focused coping.

Religious coping

In religious coping an individual uses the religious beliefs and practices in order to cope with the traumatic experiences. Similarly, all the acid attack survivors involved in this study used religious coping as their mechanism of surviving with the incident.

As some of the respondents reported:

'Allah has given me patience' (R1, R3, R4, R8, R12, R15)

Being attacked by her landlord's son of the respondents reported:

'When I see others who have deformed faces, I thank Allah for having me suffer this much.... I am way better than all the ladies in this room'. (R4)

Another respondent reported:

“I totally believe in Allah who has given me the patience that I have now”. (R6)

‘I’m thankful to Allah for giving me life and taking me out of this misery’. (R8)

Problem focused coping

Problem focused coping involves the individuals direct dealing with the problem by taking control of the situation, by getting information regarding the issue and by looking and the pros and cons of the situation and trying to adjust with these. Though difficult but acid attack survivors adopted problem focused coping and tried to come out of the misery of the incident. Respondents accepted what had happened to them and tried to cope with the problem by taking responsibility of their children, searching for a job, carrying on with their education and training, getting married and moving on with their lives, being satisfied with their family by being who they are and getting help from the police.

A 27-year-old survivor who had a primary level education was trained as a beautician at the Depilex Smile again Foundation, was proudly reporting of having her own beauty salon. As she reported:

“I’m thankful to DSF for training me and helping me support my family.... I want to work I shall be having a saloon and supporting my family”. (R3)

A 19-year-old survivor reported of being engaged to her cousin after the incident. And the family (husband and in laws) being supporting enough wanted her to carry on with her studies. As she reported:

‘It was difficult to come out of this chapter of life... but now that I am trying to, I will continue with the studies even after I get married I shall continue my studies..... It’s very nice of my uncle (father-in-law) who support me.

Emotion focused coping

Emotion focused coping involves an individual to use his/ her emotions in dealing with the problem which is difficult to change. Since the acid attack survivors have no other way of coping with this situation, they use emotion focused coping. One of the respondents reported:

‘if one is not able to go anywhere ...it’s better to be alone’.

Another respondent reported:

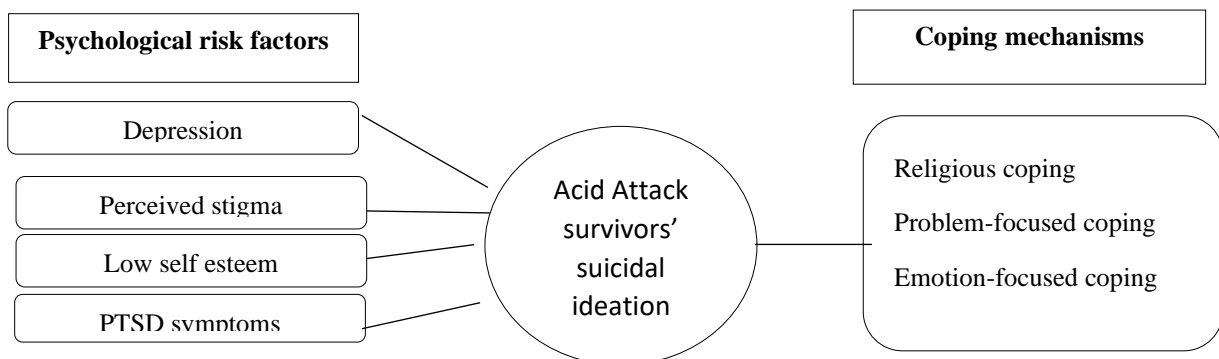
‘I have stopped meeting my relatives and other people’. (R1)

Another respondent reported:

‘because of my face I have stopped going out.

Seeking social support is an emotion focused coping with traumatic experiences. It can be of different types including emotional, informational instrumental and in form of appraisal. The respondents reported that not much support was provided to them which resulted in social isolation. Whereas some respondents reported of seeking social support from the different NGOS and family members, friends and even the President.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of suicidal risk factors and coping mechanisms.



CONCLUSION

Acid attack survivors have to deal a great deal of turmoil after they get attacked. This effects their psychological functioning to a great extent resulting in thoughts of committing suicide and in turn attempting suicide. Those who survive find different ways of coping with such problems and try to function well in their lives. The lack of social support hinders their daily functioning as well. By

providing emotional, financial and therapeutic support to them their problems can be resolved and their psychological functioning can be improved.

Limitations and future directions

This study provides a better understanding of the risk factors and coping mechanism of acid attack survivors. There are a few limitations to the study. There is a problem of generalizability because the data was limited to a few cities of Pakistan. Futures research can gather data from other cities and sample can be increased so as to overcome the problem of generalizability. Futures studies can take the preparators perspectives into account to understand their mindset therefore expansion of the research would provide more information.

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