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Seeking Support or Concealing? A Longitudinal Study of Adolescents' Friendships, Peer Victimization, Depression, and Coping With Peer Relationship Stressors

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Friends are often a source of emotional and informational support, which suggests that friends can directly assist adolescents to more effectively cope with stressful experiences, reducing emotional distress. In this longitudinal study, we examined the direct impact of friendship on adolescents' use of help seeking, comfort seeking, concealment, and rumination to cope with peer stressors. We used path modeling with two waves of data to consider the unique roles of friendship quality and coping on change in peer victimization (both overt and relational/reputational) and depression over time. Gender and age moderation were also examined. Participants were 619 Australian adolescents ($M_{age} = 12.14$) who experienced peer victimization in the past year and participated in two surveys over 1 year. In a comprehensive path model, higher quality friendship related to increased comfort-seeking responses to peer stress and decreased overt victimization over time. Regarding coping with peer stressors, comfort seeking was associated with fewer depressive symptoms over time, and concealment and rumination were associated with more overt and relational victimization, as well as increased depressive symptoms. Additionally, adolescents higher in overt victimization decreased help and comfort seeking over time, those higher in relational victimization increased comfort seeking, and those higher in depression increased concealment and rumination over time. Girls reported more problematic responses to peer stressors, and, although effects were small, gender and age moderated some longitudinal associations. Future research is needed to better understand how friendships may influence coping responses, with the aim of supporting adolescents to help each other cope with stress.

Public Significance Statement
Many adolescents report facing a great deal of stress including victimization, rejection, or conflict with their peers, which can overburden adolescents' developing coping skills and undermine mental health. In this study, we consider how friendships may be a resource for coping with stress and whether friendships and coping can have positive influences by reducing future victimization and depressive symptoms.

Keywords: depression, friendship, peer relationships, stress and coping, victimization

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Adolescents encounter many stressful events involving their peers, such as teasing and victimization, rejection, and conflict. These stressors can occur face-to-face but can also occur online day and night. Research shows that approximately 10%–15% of youth are repeatedly victimized by their peers (Troop-Gordon, 2017), and about 35% report recent experience with some form of face-to-face victimization that is often accompanied by online victimization (Modecki et al., 2014). Given how common victimization and other conflicts and challenges can be within peer relationships, it is especially notable that these stressors are some of the daily forms of social interactions most strongly linked to adolescents' emotional maladjustment. For instance, adolescents who report peer victimization also report more suicidal ideation (Islam et al., 2020; van Geel et al., 2014), greater anxiety, and—of interest to the present study—depressive symptoms (Jadambaa et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2022). In addition, peer stressors challenge adolescents' coping responses (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002; Sandstrom, 2004; Santiago et al., 2017), and they may turn to their peers, particularly close friends, as models of coping and for direct information, support, and guidance (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Casper et al., 2020; Kendrick et al., 2012). Thus, friends may model, influence, or socialize coping responses to stressful events, especially when the stress occurs within a domain, such as peer relationships, where friends are often perceived to have expertise and will have ample opportunities to assist (Laursen, 2018).

There are multiple classic developmental theories (Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953) and a large body of research (for summaries see Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Bukowski et al., 2018) to draw on for understanding the importance of child and adolescent friends for social support and as a source of practice in sharing, giving and receiving aid, listening, and negotiating conflict. Moreover, seeking out friends for support in times of difficulty is a defined part of close and positive (i.e., high quality) adolescent friendships (Bukowski et al., 1994; Ferguson et al., 2019; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Adding to the evidence of these benefits of friends, some research has shown that friendship quality and interactions with friends relate to adolescents' ways of coping with stress (Bradbury et al., 2018; Reindl et al., 2016; Spencer et al., 2013; Stone et al., 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). For example, young adolescents with lower quality friendship used more avoidant forms of coping with stressors (Spencer et al., 2013). Further, adolescents who have fewer friends or lower quality friendships have more difficulty regulating their own stress reactions or emotions (Calhoun et al., 2014; Nakamichi, 2017). Still other research with adolescents goes beyond showing covariation, finding that friends directly coach or provide suggestions to their friends regarding ways to cope with stress, which impacts on their coping strategy use concurrently or over time (Bradbury et al., 2018; Glick & Rose, 2011; Graber et al., 2016; Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019; Reindl et al., 2016; von Salisch, 2018; Wang et al., 2024). Thus, friends can be similar in their ways of coping (or emotional responding) to real or simulated stressful events, with friend similarity also associated with closer and more intimate friendships (i.e., higher quality; A. Bowker, 2004; Hiatt et al., 2015).

Despite this past focus on friendship, stress, coping, and adolescent social and emotional well-being overall, there have been few studies addressing whether friendship has a direct impact on adolescents' ways of coping within the domain of peer stress and whether higher quality friendships have more positive impact. Illustrating the less extensive amount of research on friendship and associated changes in coping or emotion regulation, Delios et al. (2023) identified only eight studies that had investigated how peer responses can change, influence, or socialize emotion regulation. Moreover, in a recent chapter (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023), emotion and coping socialization theories (Reindl et al., 2016; Zeman et al., 2013) were used as a foundation for considering what we do and do not yet know about peers, especially friends, as role models, influencers, or socializers of each other's ways of coping with stressful events. To extend on these ideas, the primary aim of this longitudinal study was to determine whether friendship quality relates to positive changes in adolescents' ways of coping with peer stressors over a 1-year period. An additional study aim was to test whether friendship quality and ways of coping with peer stressors relate to change in adolescents' social and emotional well-being, focusing on changes in peer victimization (overt, relational, and reputational victimization) and depressive symptoms.

Associations of Positive Friendships With Ways of Coping

As adolescents get older and spend more time away from home, they increasingly value the advice and social and emotional support from their friends and other similar-aged peers (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Brown & Larson, 2009; Wang et al., 2024). In addition, for most adolescents, stressors experienced within peer relationships are shared or witnessed by their peers, and many rely heavily on their friends for information, comfort, direct assistance, and feedback when it comes to peer relationships (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Laursen, 2018; Steinvik et al., 2024). Thus, having better friendships, which include more positive communication, support, and trust, can be one of the foundations for the development of emotion regulation skills during adolescence (Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019; Wang et al., 2024), which are closely linked to skills at coping with stress (Compas et al., 2014; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Given this evidence, friendships are likely to be important for assisting adolescents to identify and more adaptively cope with peer stressors.

Classic theories (Harter, 1989; Piaget, 1932; Sullivan, 1953) have long provided a firm foundation for research on peer relationships, especially friendship and the social exchanges that take place between friends, for example, the development of social skills; the consolidation of an understanding of one's own and others thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and competence (and how they compare); how to

manage conflict; and how to influence others. As has been found in research on friendship across many of these areas, empirical studies suggest that friends' impact on coping with stress in three ways (Graber et al., 2016; for a review see Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). First, the mere presence of friends can be soothing and possibly change emotional reactivity to stressful events (e.g., Adams et al., 2011). Second, adolescents engage in behavioral modeling of ways of coping with stress; adolescents watch each other's responses in social groups and learn through observation (Graber et al., 2016). Third, friends are a very good source of direct socialization and coaching in ways of coping—providing comfort and support, help-seeking opportunities, and a place for disclosure (Bradbury et al., 2018; von Salisch et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Through repeated interactions with friends during adolescence, young people develop their communication and disclosure skills, which could aid the development of coping responses to stress. For example, in a longitudinal study, adaptive coping strategies of one friend, including problem solving, distraction, and cognitive reappraisal, were associated with increases in these strategies in the other friend at the next time of measurement (Reindl et al., 2016).

A composite of friendship communication and trust (referred to here as "friendship quality") may be an especially useful marker of a history of comforting exchanges and coping coaching and socialization processes. For example, seeking support from friends has been found to be a good strategy for building closer friendships (Remillard & Lamb, 2005), and seeking social support from each other is one of the most important coping strategies linked to preserving close relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, 2011). Even co-rumination (repeatedly discussing a problem with a friend) is associated with more positive quality friendships (Rose et al., 2014), despite also being associated with adolescents' negative affect and internalizing (Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019). Thus, in the present study, we tested whether adolescents with more positive quality friendships also used more adaptive ways of coping with peer stress but also simultaneously examined whether friendship quality related to negative ways of coping including rumination and concealment.

Defining Ways of Coping

There are numerous ways of coping that could have been considered in this study. However, most often studies contrast the approach or active engagement side of coping, such as help seeking or comfort seeking, with ways of coping that are often considered maladaptive or negative and suggest disengagement, such as rumination, avoidance, social withdrawal, or concealment (Bradbury et al., 2018; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2009). Studies of coping demonstrate that engagement coping strategies are associated with greater social competence and better well-being, including fewer symptoms of internalizing disorders and better self-esteem (e.g., Reijntjes et al., 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). Conversely, more use of disengagement ways of coping has been associated with more peer victimization and poorer well-being (Taylor et al., 2013; Trompeter et al., 2018) and lower friendship quality (Spencer et al., 2013). Of particular interest in this longitudinal study was whether adolescents with more supportive friendships reported more use of engagement and less use of disengagement ways of coping with peer-related stressors. We concentrated on ways of coping that have been described as part of dyadic peer interactions that identify the quality of adolescent friendships, including help seeking and

comfort seeking (Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019), as well as rumination (Stone et al., 2019) and concealment (Klimes-Dougan et al., 2014; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023).

Friendship Quality, Ways of Coping, and Peer Victimization

Of the many peer relationship stressors that require coping, two of the most common and widely studied are overt (physical) and relational (or social–reputational) victimization. Overt aggression includes intentional efforts to harm others through direct physical and verbal threats or assaults, whereas relational, social, or reputational aggression includes intentional efforts to harm relationships or reputation through exclusion, rumor spreading, and manipulation (Prinstein et al., 2001). Both forms can include verbal attacks or other verbally aggressive behaviors. It is important to measure each form given that each has been associated with poorer adjustment and sometimes has been found to differ by gender (for a review see Voulgaridou & Kokkinos, 2023).

Having better quality friendships and using more engagement ways of coping with stress have each been identified as resources directly related to declines in peer victimization and emotional problems over time. Adolescents who report more positive quality friendships are less victimized by peers (for a review see Dryburgh et al., 2022) and show a greater decline in peer victimization over time (Casper et al., 2020; Kendrick et al., 2012). Regarding the role of coping responses in peer victimization, there is evidence that some ways of coping with peer stressors may predispose adolescents to increased peer stress, such as victimization (Cooley et al., 2022). This research has identified disengagement ways of coping that relate to both poorer friendship quality and more peer victimization. For example, adolescents who experience more victimization report less adaptive reactions to stress (e.g., more concealment and emotional suppression) and are lower in the skills that preserve quality friendships (Borowski et al., 2018; Bradbury et al., 2018). Thus, these findings suggest that lower quality friendship and poorer coping responses to peer stressors covary with each other, but the findings also suggest that they could each have impact on future peer victimization (Cooley et al., 2022; McWood et al., 2023).

Friendship Quality, Ways of Coping With Peer Stressors, and Depressive Symptoms

Friendship quality is linked to a reduction in depressive symptoms over time. Numerous cross-sectional studies have found that social support from friends is associated with fewer reported depression symptoms (Palomares Ruiz et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2017). Extending this to longitudinal research, Burke et al. (2017) found that adolescents who reported more higher quality friendships showed a greater decline in depressive symptoms over time.

Additionally, engagement and disengagement ways of coping with stress, which are often studied separately from friendship, also play significant roles in predicting patterns of depressive symptoms. In a longitudinal analogue study of early adolescents over a span of 1.5 years, higher levels of rumination and social withdrawal in response to peer rejection were the strongest predictors of adolescents' increased depression, anxiety, and sensitivities to rejection over time (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015). More broadly, research has examined how disengagement (i.e., passive and avoidant) coping

strategies characterized by rumination, denial, and concealment contribute to higher levels of depressive symptoms. By contrast, engagement (i.e., approach and active) coping strategies, which include support seeking and help seeking, can contribute to lower levels of depression (e.g., Spiekerman et al., 2021).

Research has not clarified how friendship quality and ways of coping uniquely account for adolescents' depressive symptoms. It seems likely that higher quality friendships would provide a resource for more help seeking and comfort seeking from friends in response to peer stressors. However, in some research, support from friends has been found to intensify depressive symptoms, especially for girls (Desjardins & Leadbeater, 2011; Vassallo et al., 2014). Thus, the few existing studies of friendship and coping with peer stressors do not yet provide enough information to conclude that the quality of adolescents' friendships and ways of coping with peer stressors have unique roles in explaining adolescents' depressive symptoms.

Gender and Age

Adolescent gender has been an important qualifier of associations between friendship, peer stress, and coping. Boys and girls differ in their tendencies to use a range of coping responses, especially those related to rumination (e.g., Glick & Rose, 2011; Hampel & Petermann, 2005), and they can express support differently in their friendship interactions (e.g., Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019; Rose et al., 2016). Rose and Rudolph (2006) summarized evidence across research areas that illustrated how girls' emotions are more strongly linked to their relationship stress, such as overt and relational victimization, but girls are also more likely to use coping strategies that serve to maintain relationships, such as comfort seeking. Overall, however, gender differences are often small and inconsistent. For example, in one study, boys and girls did not differ in ways of coping, except externalizing coping (e.g., oppositional behavior), which was favored by boys (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). On balance, however, the potential for gender differences and moderation is supported by past research, and we tested for such differences in the present study.

The primary features of friendships (J. C. Bowker & Weingarten, 2022; Poulin & Chan, 2010) and ways of coping with stress (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016) change with increasing age. For example, friendships are based more on common interests and companionship for older children but increasingly become founded in trust, sharing, caring, and support during and beyond adolescence. At the same time, some ways of coping with stress become more organized and specific as adolescents get older (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Some of these changes involve social ways of coping. Adolescents report relying on new sources of support to cope with stressors from outside the family during the early and middle adolescent years, particularly seeking comfort from friends to replace or supplement seeking information and comfort from parents. Consolidations of findings across studies show that young adolescents seek more self-reliance to cope with stress and may make fewer bids for support from parents but may also have more opportunities for requesting support and other coping assistance from outside the family. Taken together, such findings suggest that the impact of friendship quality on coping and social and emotional outcomes will increase as adolescents get older.

Summary and Aims of the Present Study

The purpose of this longitudinal study was to examine whether the quality of friendship plays a role in adolescents' (aged 10–15 years) changing engagement (help seeking, comfort seeking) and disengagement (concealment and rumination) ways of coping with peer stressors and whether friendship quality and ways of coping can produce change in adolescents' social and emotional problems (peer victimization and depressive symptoms). This purpose led to two specific aims. The first aim focused on the question of whether higher quality friendship relates to increased adolescents' engagement and decreased use of disengagement ways of coping with peer stressors over two time points. The second aim addressed the question of whether friendship and ways of coping with peer stressors uniquely relate to adolescents' social and emotional problems over the two time points. Moreover, gender and age moderation were tested with the expectation that friendship quality is more important to girls' and older adolescents' coping, peer victimization, and depressive symptoms than it is for boys and younger adolescents. These aims were tested in a path model linking friendship quality to change in ways of coping with peer stressors and change in social and emotional problems over the two time points. The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Higher quality friendship will be associated with an increase in comfort seeking and help seeking and a decrease in concealment of peer stress. It is unclear how friendship quality will relate to change in rumination over time.

2. Higher quality friendship, more engagement coping (comfort seeking and help seeking), and less disengagement coping (concealment and rumination) will be associated with a decline in overt and relational victimization. It is not clear whether they will have unique associations with depressive symptoms over time.

3. The above hypothesized associations will be stronger for older relative to younger adolescents, but it is not clear whether associations would differ by gender.

Method

Participants

Participants were 619 Australian adolescents in Grades 5–10 who reported victimization by their peers within the past year at Time 1 (T1; aged 10–15; M_{age} = 12.14 years, SD = 1.68, with 1% aged 9 years and 3% aged 16 years; 47% male, 52% female, and 1% nonbinary/other). The students attended nine schools (three urban secondary schools or six of their feeder primary schools). For race/ethnicity, 46% reported White, and instead or in addition 6% reported Asian, 4% reported Australian First Peoples/Torres Strait Islander or Pacific Islander, and 28% reported other backgrounds. Fifty-five percent reported that they were born in Australia and 6% born in New Zealand. The participating schools attracted students across all income brackets and reported that between 14% and 29% of the student population was within the lowest income quartile and between 4% and 30% was within the highest income quartile, depending on the school. The proportion of students in each school who spoke a language other than English at home ranged from 5% to 29%.

Of the 912 adolescents who started the survey, 840 completed much of the survey at either T1 or Time 2 (T2), whereas 72 had completed only the first one or two pages of the survey at either T1 or T2. Of the 840, a total of 619 adolescents (74%) reported some peer victimization within the past year. Thus, they reported their coping with this victimization. Relative to those included in this study, adolescents who reported no peer victimization in the past year scored higher in T1 friendship support ($M = 4.38$ vs. 3.87), $t(838) = 6.46, p < .001$, and lower in depressive symptoms ($M = 1.62$ vs. 2.73), $t(838) = -9.96, p < .001$; rumination ($M = 1.93$ vs. 2.59), $t(838) = -8.92, p < .001$; and concealment ($M = 1.76$ vs. 2.13), $t(838) = -5.30, p < .001$. They did not differ on any other T1 study measure.

Of the 619 adolescents who reported peer victimization and their associated coping responses, 87 did not complete the T2 survey (retention rate = 86%). These data were missing completely at random as determined by Little's missing completely at random test, $\chi^2(42) = 38.71, p = .616$. The 87 participants not retained at T2 did not differ on any T1 measure from other participants, $t(1, 617)$ ranged from -0.83 to 1.32, all $p > .180$. Moreover, there were no group difference in age, $t(1, 617) = -1.14, p = .255$; gender ($\chi^2 = 3.43, p = .180$); or White relative to other race/ethnicity ($\chi^2 = 0.26, p = .610$). Missing T2 data for these adolescents were imputed (see below) to maintain all 619 adolescents in all analyses.

Procedure

The Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee and the state education department granted approval for the study (No. 2019/178). Local schools were contacted via email and telephone, and the first three consenting secondary schools were included in the study. In addition, their eight feeder primary schools were invited to participate and were included (in our region of Australia, students attend primary school until Grade 6 and then transition to secondary school for Grades 7–12). All students were eligible to participate, and students delivered consent forms to their parents for completion and returned them to the school. Across the schools, 52% of students returned consent forms to the school, and, of these, 80% of parents gave informed consent for participation. The lag between T1 and T2 was 12 months.

Consent processes were conducted in the schools just prior to a national COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home order (SAHO in early 2020) that continued for 3 months. Prior to SAHO, T1 surveys were completed by 43% of participants in their regular classrooms. During SAHO, data were collected from another 27% of the participants while school moved online. The remaining 30% of participants completed the survey online from home after classroom teaching started again, but schools did not allow researchers to attend in person. Given some differences across the data collection groups even after accounting for gender and age (see Supplemental Table 1), we controlled for COVID data collection timing (before, during, after SAHO) in all models.

The portions of the survey included in this study were completed in approximately 20 min at T1 and 1 year later at T2. At T1, each student who participated at school prior to COVID-19 SAHO received a small gift for their participation, whereas others who completed the survey online from home or after SAHO received a $20 gift voucher. At T2, the pandemic had subsided (but schools were still hesitant to allow in-person data collection), and each student completed the survey online and received a $20 gift

voucher. All measures included in the survey focused on stress, coping, relationships, and mental health.

Measures

Ways of Coping: Help Seeking, Comfort Seeking, Concealing, and Rumination

Adolescents completed eight items (two items per way of coping) from the Coping Reactions to School Challenges Scale (Skinner et al., 2013) modified to focus on peer stressors rather than school challenges (see Appendix). Following the stem: *When something bad happens with your friends, with groups at school or with people on social media (like a conflict, fight, teasing, being left out or a breakup …), how much do you …*, which was followed by eight items with response options for each—Item 1 (*I don't do this at all or I do this a little*) to 4 (*So much! I do this almost all the time*). At T1 and T2, respectively, Pearson's r was .50 and .50 for the two help-seeking items, $r = .56$ and .50 for comfort seeking, $r = .65$ and .59 for concealment, and $r = .65$ and .63 for rumination. Items were averaged so that a higher score indicated greater use of each of the four measured ways of coping.

Positive Friendship Quality

Positive friendship quality was measured with the peer subscale of the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment–Revised (10 items; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; "I can count on my friends when I need to talk about something important"). Responses ranged from 1 (*No! Not at all true for me*) to 6 (*Yes! Totally true for me*). Responses to items were averaged to form a total score of friendship quality, with a higher score indicating higher quality friendships. Cronbach's αs are .83 and .80 at T1 and T2, respectively.

Experienced Peer Victimization

Overt and relational victimization in the past year were measured with the overt, relational, and reputational victimization items from the Revised Peer Experiences Questionnaire (Prinstein et al., 2001, e.g., "Someone threatened to hurt me or beat me up" [overt], "Someone did not invite me to a party or other event even though they knew that I wanted to go," [relational], and "Someone said means things about me so that people would think I was a loser" [reputational]). Responses ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*). The three overt victimization items were averaged to produce a total score (Cronbach's αs = .81 and .80 at T1 and T2, respectively). The three relational and, separately, the three reputational victimization items were averaged to produce two scores. The two scores were summed, with a higher score indicating more victimization. Cronbach's αs are .76 and .86 at T1 and T2, respectively.

Depressive Symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured with three items from the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1978, e.g., *I feel sad*). These items were selected for the present study after completing factor analyses of data collected previously (e.g., Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2016) from similar aged Australian adolescents who had completed the full Children's Depression Inventory. Response options ranged from 1 (*No! Not at all true for me*) to 6 (*Yes! Totally*

true for me). Items were averaged, with a higher score indicating more depressive symptoms. Cronbach's αs are .90 and .91 at T1 and T2, respectively.

Data Analyses

Analyses were conducted using SPSS and Amos v30. To maintain all participants, we used multiple imputation, imputing 20 data sets, before calculating descriptive statistics and correlations between all primary measures including age. Additionally, girls and boys were compared on all measures using independent-groups t tests. For the gender group comparisons, the nonbinary participants were excluded; however, means and standard deviations for all gender groups are reported for completeness.

The main analyses involved fitting a path model to simultaneously address the two research aims followed by fitting a two-group model to test gender moderation and an additional model to test for age moderation. In all path models, full information maximum likelihood was used to impute T2 missing data. We report the χ^2, the comparative fit index (CFI), and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) to judge model fit, where a good fit is indicated by a CFI > .90 and RMSEA < .08. The model included T1 friendship quality, T1 and T2 ways of coping, T1 and T2 peer victimization measures, and T1 and T2 depressive symptoms. To address the first aim—whether friendship quality relates to change in ways of coping with peer stressors—we freed paths from T1 friendship quality to T2 ways of coping, controlling for T1 ways of coping. To address the second aim—whether friendship and coping are related to peer victimization (overt and relational) and depressive symptoms over time—we freed paths from (a) T1 friendship quality to T2 peer victimization and depressive symptoms, and (b) from T2 coping to T2 peer victimization and depressive symptoms, adjusting for T1 coping, peer victimization, and depressive symptoms. Although not a primary aim of this study, we also freed paths from T1 victimization and depressive symptoms to T2 coping, considering it is likely that more victimized or depressed adolescents may report different patterns of coping with peer stress (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016).

Building on the initial model, we next fit an unconstrained two-group model to estimate all model paths for boys and for girls, as well as a fully gender-constrained model. Because the fits of these two models differed, suggesting gender moderation, we conducted a follow-up model to isolate whether this moderation was specific to the temporal paths (structural regression weights). Finally, we tested whether age moderated any temporal path. For these analyses, variables were centered before forming interaction terms (e.g., Centered Friendship Quality × Centered Age), and interaction terms were added as covariates of T1 measures and as predictors of T2 measures.

Transparency and Openness

Above, we have summarized our handling of missing data, all manipulations of the data, how measures were completed and composite scores were formed, and other measures included in the survey not included in this study. All data analyses, code, and output are available from the first author upon reasonable request. This study's design and analysis were not preregistered but the key aims were specified in a funded grant application.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Between All Variables

Table 1 provides the means and standard deviations of all primary variables, for the total sample, as well as correlations between all measures (see Supplemental Table 2 for correlations for boys separate from correlations for girls). As shown in Table 1, T1 friendship quality was positively correlated with help seeking and comfort seeking and negatively correlated with concealment. In addition, friendship quality was negatively correlated with peer victimization and depressive symptoms, with victimization and depressive symptoms positively correlated with each other. Regarding associations of coping with other measures, concealment and rumination, but not help seeking or comfort seeking, were positively correlated with peer victimization (overt and relational); comfort seeking at T1 was negatively correlated with depressive symptoms; and concealment and rumination at T1 and T2 were positively correlated with depressive symptoms. Correlations of age with all other measures revealed that older adolescents reported less T1 help seeking, more T1 rumination, and more T1 and T2 depressive symptoms.

Gender Differences

Means and standard deviations for all measures for boys and girls, and the results of t tests comparing gender, are shown in Table 2. Table 2 also reports the means and standard deviations of all measures for the nonbinary participants, but they are not included in the gender comparisons. Adjusting the p value to <.004 to account for 15 comparisons, boys, relative to girls, reported lower quality friendship, more overt victimization at both T1 and T2, less relational victimization at T1 and T2, fewer depressive symptoms at T1 and T2, less T1 comfort seeking, and less rumination at T1 and T2.

Path Model of Friendship, Coping, Peer Victimization, and Depressive Symptoms

Table 3 summarizes all temporal standardized path coefficients from the model of friendship quality as related to coping, peer victimization, and depressive symptoms at T1 and T2, whereas Figure 1 illustrates all *significant* temporal paths. The path model had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(42) = 84.93$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .041 (90% confidence interval, CI [.028, .053]), $p = .887$. As shown in Figure 1, partly supporting H1 and H2, higher quality friendship was directly associated with a greater decline in overt victimization and a greater positive change in comfort seeking. In addition, partly supporting H2, comfort seeking to cope with peer stress was associated with decreased depressive symptoms from T1 to T2, and concealment and rumination were associated with increased overt and relational victimization and depressive symptoms from T1 to T2. Help seeking was not associated with victimization or depressive symptoms in this model.

T1 victimization and depressive symptoms were also related to changes in coping in this model. T1 overt victimization was associated with a decline in help seeking and comfort seeking from T1 to T2, whereas T1 relational victimization was associated with an increase in comfort seeking. Moreover, T1

Table 1

Correlations Between All Measures

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. T1 friendship quality	—							
2. T1 help seeking	.26***	—						
3. T1 comfort seeking	.36***	.53***	—					
4. T1 concealment	−.20***	−.24***	−.27***	—				
5. T1 rumination	.02	.07	.10*	.27***	—			
6. T1 overt victimization	−.11**	.03	−.04	.27***	.19***	—		
7. T1 relational victimization	−.13**	.02	.05	.22***	.38***	.54***	—	
8. T1 depressive symptoms	−.08*	−.17***	−.03	.37***	.41***	.36***	.48***	—
9. T2 help seeking	.12*	.28***	.12*	−.17***	.03	.14**	−.06	−.13*
10. T2 comfort seeking	.22***	.25***	.26***	−.22***	.05	−.15**	.01	−.09
11. T2 concealment	−.13**	−.12*	−.19***	.32***	.15***	.21***	.17***	.26***
12. T2 rumination	.05	.06	.02	.06	.33***	.08	.22***	.23***
13. T2 overt victimization	−.12**	−.01	−.04	.20***	.08	.41***	.29***	.21***
14. T2 relational victimization	.02	.01	.03	.14***	.13**	.25***	.44***	.27***
15. T2 depressive symptoms	.00	−.07	.03	.20***	.30***	.21***	.33***	.52***
16. Age	.02	−.08*	.00	.06	.09*	−.05	.05	.22***
M	3.87	2.08	2.38	2.13	2.59	2.17	5.25	2.73
SD	1.03	0.82	0.87	0.90	0.97	0.99	1.77	1.52

Measure	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
9. T2 help seeking	—							
10. T2 comfort seeking	.53***	—						
11. T2 concealment	−.12*	−.14**	—					
12. T2 rumination	.17***	.23***	.23***	—				
13. T2 overt victimization	−.01	.03	.25***	.20***	—			
14. T2 relational victimization	.03	.06	.23***	.35***	.56***	—		
15. T2 depressive symptoms	−.05	−.11	.34***	.37***	.37***	.47***	—	
16. Age	−.01	−.02	−.01	.02	−.05	.05	.14**	—
M	2.05	2.36	2.18	2.59	2.00	5.02	2.73	
SD	0.78	0.83	0.90	0.95	0.96	1.86	1.52	

Note. $N = 619$. Overt victimization scores can range from 1 to 5, relational victimization scores from 1 to 10, coping scores from 1 to 4, and depressive symptoms and friendship quality scores from 1 to 6. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

depressive symptom level was associated with an increase in concealment and rumination from T1 to T2.

There were no significant indirect effects of friendship quality on T2 victimization or depressive symptoms via coping (standardized path estimates ranged from −.01 to .01). Note that when we controlled for data collection timing (pre, during, and after pandemic SAHO; dummy coded to pre vs. during and after vs. during), the model fit was substantially degraded, $\chi^2(58) = 172.83$, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .057 (90% CI [.047, .066]), $p = .126$, but only one directional path changed by .01. Thus, we removed this control from the model, and the results reported are without these controls.

Gender Moderation

When all path estimates in this model were unconstrained, allowing estimates to be specific to boys and girls, this two-group model had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(84) = 130.89$, $p < .001$, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .030 (90% CI [.020, .040]), $p = 1.00$, and this fit was significantly better than a fully gender-constrained model, $\chi^2(177) = 333.72$, $p < .001$, CFI = .86, RMSEA = .052 (90% CI [.046, .057]), $p = .305$, $\Delta\chi^2(93) = 202.83$, $p < .001$. Next, to isolate whether this difference in model fits indicated gender moderation of the temporal paths in the model, we fit a model with only the structural paths coefficients (directional paths not

including stabilities/autocorrelations) freed to differ for boys and girls, which had a good fit to the data, $\chi^2(116) = 165.19$, $p < .001$, CFI = .97, RMSEA = .030 (90% CI [.021, .038]) $p = 1.00$. Moreover, the fit differed slightly ($p < .05$) from the fit of the fully constrained model, $\Delta\chi^2(31) = 48.49$, suggesting gender moderation of some directional paths.

The paths for boys and girls for the model freeing only temporal paths are shown in Table 3. Follow-up analyses testing gender moderation of each direct path revealed that six were significantly moderated by gender (all $p < .05$), which are presented in bold in Table 3. However, only four of the six differences involved a path that was either significant for boys and not girls or vice versa. First, there was a nonsignificant relation of friendship quality with boys' comfort seeking, but a significant positive association of friendship quality with girls' comfort seeking. Second, regarding the other three paths, depression had a nonsignificant relation to boys' comfort seeking and help seeking, whereas depression was associated with a decline in girls' comfort seeking and help seeking. By contrast, depression was associated with an increase in boys' concealment of peer stress but was not significantly related to girls' concealment. The other two paths moderated by gender were not significant for either boys or girls (the association of help seeking with relational victimization and the association of help seeking with overt victimization).

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and Comparisons of Boys to Girls (n = 610) and Means and Standard Deviations for Nonbinary Participants (n = 9)

Measure	Boys (n = 291)		Girls (n = 319)		Boy/girl comparison			Nonbinary (n = 9)	
	M	SD	M	SD	t(1, 617)	p	Cohen's d	M	SD
T1 friendship quality	3.64	0.93	4.05	1.08	−5.09	<.001	−0.41	4.54	0.98
T1 overt victimization	2.39	0.95	1.95	0.97	5.65	<.001	0.46	12.70	1.07
T1 relational victimization	5.03	1.71	5.42	1.80	−2.68	.004	−0.22	6.37	1.48
T1 depressive symptoms	2.43	1.33	2.94	1.60	−4.25	<.001	−0.35	4.96	1.07
T1 help seeking	2.04	0.81	2.13	0.83	−1.37	.237	−0.11	1.67	0.61
T1 comfort seeking	2.20	0.82	2.54	0.87	−5.00	<.001	−0.41	2.72	0.97
T1 concealment	2.21	0.88	2.06	0.91	2.02	.056	0.16	2.33	1.23
T1 rumination	2.42	0.97	2.72	0.95	−3.80	<.001	−0.31	3.50	0.79
T2 overt victimization	2.12	0.93	1.87	1.00	2.96	.003	0.26	2.33	1.70
T2 relational victimization	4.69	1.75	5.30	1.88	−3.85	<.001	−0.33	5.78	2.66
T2 depressive symptoms	2.50	1.35	3.23	1.61	−5.54	<.001	−0.48	4.94	0.90
T2 help seeking	1.98	0.74	2.12	0.81	−1.78	.077	−0.17	2.10	1.08
T2 comfort seeking	2.29	0.73	2.43	0.90	−1.79	.077	−0.16	2.40	0.82
T2 concealment	2.17	0.81	2.18	0.95	−0.23	.817	−0.02	2.20	1.44
T2 rumination	2.36	0.92	2.79	0.93	−5.14	<.001	−0.46	3.40	0.42

Note. Overt victimization scores can range from 1 to 5, relational victimization scores from 1 to 10, coping scores from 1 to 4, and depressive symptoms and friendship quality scores from 1 to 6. T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.

Age Moderation

When interaction effects were introduced into the full model to investigate whether age was a moderator of paths from friendship quality and ways of coping to T2 measures of victimization and depressive symptoms (adjusting form T1 coping, victimization, and depressive symptoms), none of the Friendship Quality × Age interaction paths to coping, victimization, or depressive symptoms were significant (standardized path estimates ranged from −.07 to −.14, p = .059 to .935). Moreover, with one exception, age did not moderate any associations of coping with T2 measures of victimization and depressive symptoms (standardized path estimates ranged from −.07 to .08, p = .026 to .982). Regarding the one exception, age had a small moderating effect on the association of concealment with increasing depressive symptoms from T1 to T2 (standardized path estimates = .08, p = .026), suggesting the association was stronger as adolescents got older.

Discussion

The present study had two primary aims with an overarching purpose of identifying social, emotional, and stress-coping benefits of good quality friendships for adolescents. First, we considered the interrelationships of friendship quality with engagement and disengagement ways of coping, measured specific to coping with peer stressors, to begin to tackle the question of whether higher quality friendships directly relate to adolescents' ways of coping with peer stressors into the future. Second, we considered the question of whether having better quality friendships and relying on more engagement and less disengagement coping would be directly related to declines in overt and relational (combined with reputational) victimization by peers and depressive symptoms. We measured two active engagement-based coping strategies of help seeking and comfort seeking, as well as two disengagement or negative strategies of concealment and rumination; all have been mentioned in research on adolescent friendship quality. We also

considered gender and age differences in associations (i.e., moderation) given that such differences have been suggested in some previous research on peer victimization, friendships, coping, and emotional adjustment (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; J. C. Bowker & Weingarten, 2022; Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023).

Friendship Related to Coping, Victimization, and Depression

Our correlational findings showed that friendship quality (measured as good communication and trust in the friend) and most of the measured ways of coping with peer stressors are moderately intermingled. Adolescents who report better quality friendships rely more often on help seeking and comfort seeking in response to peer stressors, and they less often conceal the peer stress they face. These findings concur with past research identifying the important function of supportive friendships for providing a space for disclosure and soothing following stress (Graber et al., 2016; for a review see Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023) or when managing negative emotions (Hale et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Other research findings suggest that direct coaching or coping suggestions between peer companions or friends are the influences on coping responses to stressors (Glick & Rose, 2011; Reindl et al., 2016; von Salisch, 2018). For example, in one study of peer socialization of coping (Bradbury et al., 2018), peers' coaching (targeting distraction, problem solving, retaliation/opposition, and distancing) was related to adolescents' reports of use of the strategies in cases of cybervictimization. Adding to this past research, when considered over time, adolescents with higher quality friendships increased more in comfort seeking by T2, but friendship quality had no unique association with help seeking, concealment, or rumination by T2 once previous level of victimization, depressive symptoms, and coping was accounted for.

There was also evidence that adolescents who report higher quality friendships also are lower in victimization and depressive

Table 3

Standardized Path Coefficients for All Temporal Paths for the Full Sample (N = 619) and for Boys (n = 291) and Girls (n = 319) Separately

T1 predictor[a]	T2 outcome	Total sample	Boys	Girls
Directional paths				
Friend quality	Help seeking	.05	.01	.04
Friend quality	**Comfort seeking**	**.14****	**.05**	**.22****
Friend quality	Concealment	−.06	−.07	−.08
Friend quality	Rumination	.07	.04	.02
Friend quality	Overt victimization	−.09*	−.12*	−.04
Friend quality	Relational victimization	.04	−.03	.06
Friend quality	Depressive symptoms	.07	.04	.05
Help seeking (T2)	**Overt victimization**	**−.01**	**.12**	**−.10**
Help seeking (T2)	**Relational victimization**	**.03**	**.12**	**−.07**
Help seeking (T2)	Depressive symptoms	.06	.11	−.03
Comfort seeking (T2)	Overt victimization	.09	.08	.09
Comfort seeking (T2)	Relational victimization	−.01	.05	−.02
Comfort seeking (T2)	Depressive symptoms	−.14**	−.06	−.17*
Concealment (T2)	Overt victimization	.14**	.16*	.11
Concealment (T2)	Relational victimization	.14**	.17**	.10
Concealment (T2)	Depressive symptoms	.18***	.14*	.22***
Rumination (T2)	Overt victimization	.11*	.17*	.07
Rumination (T2)	Relational victimization	.23***	.18**	.21***
Rumination (T2)	Depressive symptoms	.27***	.28***	.20***
Overt victimization	Help seeking	−.16**	−.04	−.16*
Overt victimization	Comfort seeking	−.21***	−.17*	−.24**
Overt victimization	Concealment	.08	.11	.10
Overt victimization	Rumination	−.07	−.01	.07
Relational victimization	Help seeking	.06	.06	.00
Relational victimization	Comfort seeking	.15*	.14*	.17*
Relational victimization	Concealment	−.01	−.05	−.01
Relational victimization	Rumination	.11	.04	.07
Depressive symptoms	**Help seeking**	**−.06**	**.09**	**−.19***
Depressive symptoms	**Comfort seeking**	**−.07**	**.11**	**−.14***
Depressive symptoms	**Concealment**	**.14***	**.23****	**.04**
Depressive symptoms	Rumination	.12*	.12	.02
Stabilities[b]				
Overt victimization	Overt victimization	.37		
Relational victimization	Relational victimization	.36		
Depressive symptoms	Depressive symptoms	.39		
Help seeking	Help seeking	.22		
Comfort seeking	Comfort seeking	.22		
Concealment	Concealment	.26		
Rumination	Rumination	.25		

Note. All significant correlations ($p < .05$) between T1 measures, between T2 coping, and between T2 victimization and depressive symptoms were freed in the model, but these associations are not reported here. See Table 2 for correlations in the full sample and Supplemental Table 2 for correlations for boys separate from girls. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the significant temporal paths for the total sample. Paths presented in bold for boys and girls identify those that differed ($p < .05$). T1 = Time 1; T2 = Time 2.
[a] T1 except where noted with T2. [b] Fixed to equality for boys and girls.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

symptoms (with small effects), and higher quality friendship was associated with a small decline in overt victimization, but not relational victimization or depressive symptoms, over 1 year. Regarding the role of the two engagement measures of help seeking and comfort seeking to cope with peer stressors, adolescents who reported more help seeking had fewer depressive symptoms at T1, and comfort seeking was associated with a decline in depressive symptoms by T2 (but neither help seeking nor comfort seeking was associated with change in victimization). Thus, seeking help or comfort as a coping response to peer stress is more frequent among adolescents with higher quality friendships, higher quality friendship is related to increased comfort seeking over time, and comfort seeking is linked to fewer depressive symptoms concurrently and 1 year later. Although

these direct effects were significant, there was no significant indirect effect of friendship quality on later depressive symptoms via increased comfort seeking in the main path model. Nevertheless, this pattern of findings does raise the question of when and why higher quality friendships can alleviate adolescents' depressive symptoms and suggests the need for continued research on this topic.

At T1, friendship quality was not significantly correlated with rumination in response to peer stressors. However, there was a positive effect of friendship quality and later rumination. In addition, rumination was positively correlated with more help seeking, comfort seeking, and concealment of peer stress. These findings suggest that rumination as a response to peer stressors has a complex relationship with both seeking more support and concealing more from others.

Figure 1

Results of the Model of the Effects of Friendship Support and Coping on Future Coping, Peer Victimization, and Depressive Symptoms
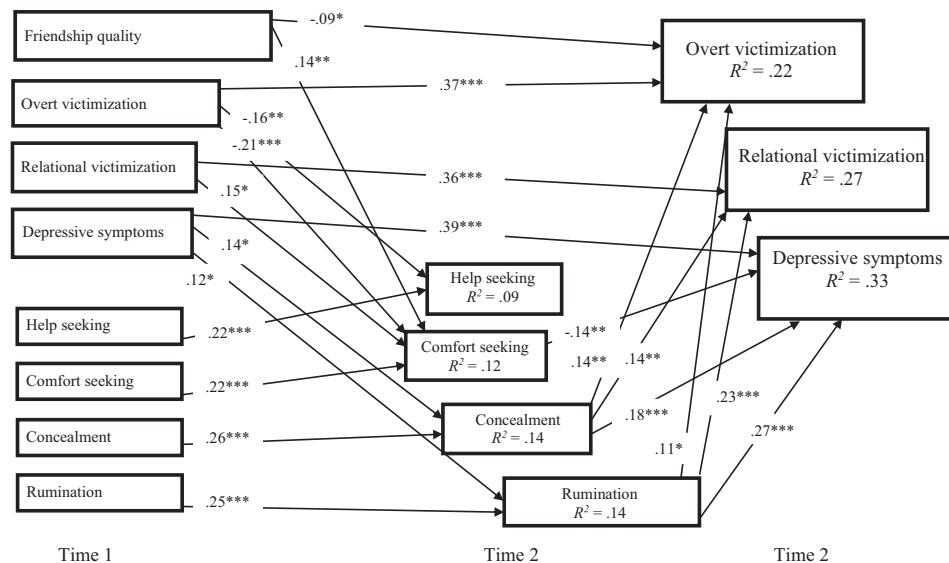
Note. $N = 619$. Standardized path estimates are shown. $\chi^2(42) = 84.93$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index $= .98$, root-mean-square error of approximation $= .041$ (90% confidence interval [.028, .053]), $p = .887$.
$^* p < .05$. $^{**} p < .01$. $^{***} p < .001$.

Such findings align with some previous research that has reported a complex interrelationship of rumination emerging from within adolescent friendship interactions and stress responding. In this past research, corumination with friends (which is associated positively with personal rumination) is associated with closer and more supportive friendships but also more internalizing problems (Glick & Rose, 2011).

These findings reveal the relevance of conducting future research that incorporates information about the specific interactions between friends when discussing stressful events and features of the friends' experiences that might impact on their responses and their own behaviors over time. This is especially relevant given the mixed findings regarding the impact of friendship quality on changes in victimization and depression among adolescents (for reviews see Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Rubin et al., 2018; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). Burke et al. (2017) found no direct associations and attributed this to the varying ability of adolescent friends to provide support for adaptive responses to stressful events. Bagwell and Bukowski (2018) discussed in detail how the features of friends may be important, focusing specifically on the importance of having prosocial friends. Accruing benefits from close and trusting friendships for social and emotional well-being may depend on receiving good advice and support in response to help or comfort seeking, which often requires friends with more social skills, better personal emotion regulation capacity, and fewer problems in their peer relationships. In addition, views regarding beneficial support can differ between friends (Hiatt et al., 2015). For example, some adolescents could be more limited in their skills at empathy (Stern et al., 2021) or problem solving (Waller et al., 2014) interfering with any opportunities for support or co-problem solving. Moreover,

for some adolescents their help seeking or comfort seeking could be met with minimizing or punishing responses from their friends (Hale et al., 2023). Moreover, there often is a considerable level of similarity between the characteristics of adolescents in friendship dyads, resulting from (homophilious) peer selection (Veenstra et al., 2018) or influence and socialization (Brendgen et al., 2010; Laursen, 2018). Most relevant for coping with stressful events, adolescents who have difficulty regulating their own stress reactions or emotions tend to have friends who also have difficulty with regulation and provide less support (Calhoun et al., 2014; Nakamichi, 2017). Further, friends have been found to be similar in aggressive and passive coping in the context of conflict with friends (A. Bowker, 2004), and Rubin et al. (2018) described the evidence that withdrawn or victimized children can have friends with similar characteristics or experiences. In addition, in a novel study of friend dyads involving vignettes that measure emotional reactions and coping responses to ambiguous peer events, friends were similar in their anticipated negative emotional reactions (e.g., anger) and their coping response of appeasement (minimizing the event; Spencer et al., 2013).

Others have pointed to the effects of corumination within friendship dyads, the paradox whereby high perceived friendship quality is associated with excessive discussion and focuses on stressors between friends, which is thought to minimize any positive impacts on stress and negative emotionality (Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Guarneri-White et al., 2015; Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2021). This may explain why we found no significant association of friendship quality with rumination about peer stressors and found that rumination was associated with both more engagement coping and concealment of peer stress.

Concealment and Rumination as Related to Victimization and Depression

In contrast to the findings for help seeking and comfort seeking, the two measures of disengagement ways of coping with peer stressors—concealment and rumination—did directly relate to increased victimization and depressive symptoms over time, with both concealment and rumination related to increased overt and relational victimization and increased depressive symptoms by T2. Concealment as a coping strategy is often aligned with acts of withdrawal, avoiding others, or social isolation (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011), and adolescents are more likely to engage in such behaviors when they have lower competence and fewer supports for managing stressors (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2011). Indeed, concealment and other negative or disengagement coping strategies are associated with lower social competence, relatedness, and self-esteem, as well as higher loneliness (Skinner et al., 2013; Watson & Nesdale, 2012)—which are well-established risk factors and correlates of victimization by peers and depression during adolescence (Casper & Card, 2017; Vucetic et al., 2021). Adding to these past findings is our novel focus specifically on concealment of peer stress, finding it to be a risk for increases in victimization and depression.

Rumination is a mode of responding to stress that can lead to a cycle of negative thinking about causes and consequences and a focus on emotional symptoms of distress (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015). This cognitive response to peer stressors is known to instigate self-criticism and hopelessness, and, given the positive link between rumination and concealment found in the present study, it seems to facilitate (or at least co-occur with) secrecy and lack of full disclosure of problems to others. Moreover, adolescents are known to be particularly vulnerable to negative cycles of rumination, and this is commonly related to peer stressors because of their heightened salience (Schweizer et al., 2020; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016). Thus, the findings here are consistent with the problematic nature of ruminating about peer stressors for a range of continuing social and emotional problems, such as increasing victimization and depression over time, and adds on the important risk of concealing peer stressors from others.

Victimization and Depressive Symptoms as Related to Changes in Coping With Peer Stress

Although not a primary aim of this study, the findings also identified how peer victimization and depressive symptoms may have implications for changing the ways adolescents cope with peer stress. Adolescents who reported more overt victimization at baseline declined in their help seeking and comfort seeking over time, whereas those who were more depressed at baseline showed an increase in concealment and rumination. These findings add to the growing body of evidence on how existing emotional and social problems become sensitivities that can interfere in engagement while also exacerbating disengagement, coping responses when stress occurs, thus setting young people up for increasing problems and, potentially, more stress over time (for reviews see Zimmer-Gembeck, 2015, 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016).

However, there was one exception to the pattern of victimization and depressive symptoms as risks for poorer ways of coping with stress. Relational victimization was associated with an increase in comfort seeking, but only once overt victimization and depressive symptoms were accounted for (there was no significant zero-order correlation between relational victimization and comfort seeking at T1 or T2). It is widely known that relational victimization can occur inside and outside of friendship groups and can occur for both popular adolescents and among less popular adolescents (Casper & Green, 2023; Predix et al., 2025; Seo et al., 2023). Thus, this association might be an outgrowth of these somewhat unique features of relational victimization relative to overt victimization. Relationship victimization could possibly increase comfort seeking, especially when it occurs among adolescents who have more access to other friends. Another possibility is that adolescents may find it easier to describe and seek comfort from others for relational aggression when it is not co-occurring with overt victimization. Surprisingly, it might be expected that this association could be stronger among girls than boys. However, our gender moderation model found that this association was significant and positive among both boys and girls.

Gender and Age

Gender differences were found in the level of almost all measures in this study, which is consistent with past research showing higher friendship quality and more relational victimization, comfort seeking, rumination, and depression in girls than boys, but more overt victimization in boys than girls (Glick & Rose, 2011; Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2019; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2014). Additionally, supporting H3, gender moderated the associations of friendship quality with later comfort seeking, with the association appearing stronger (and only significant) for girls relative to boys. However, there was no evidence of gender moderation of the associations of ways of coping with peer victimization and depression symptoms. Other temporal associations that differed between boys and girls were specific to identifying the specific ways that depressive symptoms may undermine coping over time. For girls, but not boys, reporting more depressive symptoms was related to a decline in comfort seeking and help seeking for peer stress, whereas, for boys, but not girls, reporting more depressive symptoms was associated with an increase in concealment of peer stress. It seems that measuring both engagement and disengagement ways of coping with stress is an important direction when the aim is to identify how social and emotional problems might increase risk in boys compared with girls. Girls, who reported (marginally or significantly) more help seeking and significantly more comfort seeking than boys, seem to decrease seeking support when they are depressed. By contrast, boys, who were marginally higher in concealment than girls (at T1), increased in this behavior when depressed. Thus, some of the more predominant gendered ways of coping with peer stress tend to be those impacted by depressive symptoms. Only rumination, which was higher in girls than boys, did not show this pattern.

Notably, inconsistent with H3, there was no evidence of age as a moderator of the associations of friendship with coping or of friendship and coping with victimization and depressive symptoms. However, building on the findings for gender moderation, the one potential impact of age seems to be an increasing role of concealment of peer stress for increased depressive symptoms as adolescents get older. This again highlights the importance of having a focus on both engagement and disengagement ways of coping with stress as implicated in adolescents' developing social and emotional problems. Concealment of peer stress is clearly a risk for victimization

and depressive symptoms in boys and girls, and it may become even more problematic as adolescents get older.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

There are several limitations of this study. First, our study did not determine the specific mechanisms of friendship that may account for changes in coping, victimization, or depression. Evidence suggests that friends can impact each other in various ways including through availability and presence, modeling of behavior and coping responses, and via direct influence or socialization/coaching (Adams et al., 2011; Bagwell & Bukowski, 2018; Borowski et al., 2018; Graber et al., 2016; Laursen, 2018; Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2023). This uncertainty regarding the mechanisms of friendship influence identifies a gap in our understanding of the specific role of friendship quality in adolescents' coping with stress that could be addressed in future research. Similarly, we did not ask about help seeking and comfort seeking from friends only, but research suggest that adolescents would often be seeking help and comfort from friends because young adolescents often desire peer support as much as or more parent support with stressors (Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2016; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011, 2016). This may be especially the case for stressors that are viewed as more within the domain of peers than of parents, such as overt and relational/reputational victimization (Laursen, 2018).

A second limitation is the reliance of this study on self-report, which introduces the possibility of subjective perceptions and individual biases and, as such, should be interpreted with caution. Even two friends often report different qualities within their friendship (Hiatt et al., 2015). Last, it is important to point out that some of the data collection at T1 took place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. This timing affected the accessibility of the research team to participants in schools. It may also have changed adolescents' exposure to peer stressors or to friendship support due to social distancing (although offline victimization often co-occurs with online victimization, and adolescents are often experts at maintaining online connections to friends). There were some differences between groups of adolescents by timing of data collection (before, during, or after SAHOs) that may have been due to the effects of schooling at home or return to school after SAHOs were lifted. However, timing was controlled in the analyses with no change to the results.

An additional limitation to raise is our concentration on testing direct effects of friendship quality and of ways of coping in the present study while also focusing on gender and age moderation. There are bodies of research that illustrate how friendship quality and coping can be buffers or protective against the impacts of stressors and other negative experiences on mental health and other important outcomes (e.g., academic engagement; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2016). Based on the present findings, future studies should address the joint buffering effects of friendship quality and ways of coping on the association between stressful events (such as peer victimization) and adolescents' development.

Conclusion

The current findings emphasize when and how friendship quality directly relates to adolescents' coping with peer-related stressors and their social (peer victimization) and mental health (depressive symptoms) outcomes. Higher quality friendships, which involve better communication and trust, are intermingled with more frequent use of the engagement coping strategies of help seeking and comfort seeking and lower levels of concealment of peer stressors. Having higher quality friendship also relates to increased comfort seeking for peer stress over time, especially for girls, and relates to decreased overt peer victimization over time. In addition, the ways adolescents cope with peer stress can reduce or exacerbate their social and emotional problems into the future. Adolescents who report more comfort seeking for peer stress show a greater decrease in depressive symptoms over time, and those who report a greater tendency to respond to peer stressors with the interlinked disengagement coping strategies of concealment and rumination are at greater risk for increasing peer victimization and depressive symptoms, with the impact of concealment on depression potentially getting stronger as adolescents get older. Additional research is needed to understand how friendships can model, influence, or socialize adolescents' development of coping and how to capitalize on trusted friends to have more direct impact on adolescents' changing social and emotional health.

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Appendix

Measurement Items for Adolescents' Help Seeking, Comfort Seeking, Rumination, and Concealment as Ways of Coping With Peer Stressors

When something bad happens with your friends, with groups at school or with people on social media (like a conflict, fight, teasing, being left out or a breakup) … .

How much do you …

ask for some help with it? (help seeking)

get some help to understand what happened? (help seeking)

talk about it with someone to try to make yourself feel better? (comfort seeking)

spend time with someone to try to cheer up? (comfort seeking)

keep thinking about it over and over? (rumination)

feel like you can't get it out of your head? (rumination)

don't tell anyone about it? (concealment)

don't let anybody know about it? (concealment)