

# Coping strategies: how single parents in Scotland deal with problems

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**How do single parents deal with problems that they face?  
Do all single parents approach problems in the same way?  
What more needs to be done to better understand how single parents cope with everyday challenges?**

## Why this matters

Problems must be dealt with. It is widely accepted that there are many ways in which we can deal with everyday challenges. For example, some years ago, [Scottish Government research with low income families](#) identified that coping strategies were part of everyday life, with 22 different financial management strategies used to cope with low income. However, some of these responses may generate their own problems, rather than provide solutions. Therefore, it is important to better understand how single parents are dealing with the problems that they face.

## What do we already know?

It is well evidenced that single parents in Scotland face an array of issues in their daily lives that require coping mechanisms. One of the key concerns for single parents is low income, which was found to be a key source of stress and worry by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health who investigated [Barriers and opportunities facing lone parents moving into paid work](#). Most of the literature on coping strategies tends to focus on the impact of medical conditions on family relationships. There has been little done to examine how single parents manage issues on a daily basis. Early research by [Compas and Williams \(1990\)](#) found that single mothers were more likely to use coping strategies that involved accepting responsibility, reevaluating situations and looking for positive outcomes when compared to married mothers. More recently, in exploring [How lone parents manage low incomes](#), the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that that single parents would most likely 'get on with it' or make adaptations in a bid to cope with daily concerns such as affording food, clothes or leisure activities for their children. Concerning coping strategies that are less used by single parents, [One Parent Families \(UK\)](#) found that single parents are less likely to seek advice about any challenges they may be facing. These variations indicate there is a need to revisit the issue to gain a better understanding of who or what helps single parents cope in Scotland today.

## Our research

This is the third of seven research briefings arising from the Single Parent Community Connections project. With the support of the European Union and the Scottish Government, this [Social Innovation Fund](#) project has two aims. First, it aims to better understand isolation and loneliness among single parents in Scotland. Second, it aims to use this knowledge to design and deliver practical service delivery options to tackle these problems.

An online survey was designed by the [Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit](#) and approved by One Parent Families Scotland. Almost 900 single parents completed the survey in the Spring of 2018. The survey was introduced as aiming to find out more about the nature of the challenges that single parents face in Scotland and to explore what could be done to address them. How single parents respond to problems was one of the broader issues that were explored to better understand how we might respond to the challenges presented by social isolation and loneliness. The numbers that are reported in this briefing have been quality assured, including weighting some results to ensure that they are representative of single parents in Scotland, as a whole. Twelve in-depth interviews were also undertaken across Scotland to explore the key issues in greater depth. The anonymity of participating parents is protected in this briefing. More details about the research can be provided on request.

## Findings - What's the big picture?

We adapted the [COPE inventory](#) to better understand how single parents in Scotland dealt with problems that they encountered. This has been widely tested and involves asking people how often they use particular strategies to deal with problems. There are 15 groups of coping strategies. In our work, we asked single parents to describe how often they used each strategy using a five-point scale, ranging from “never” to “all of the time”.

<i>Coping strategy</i>	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	All of the time
Planning what to do	2%	6%	28%	45%	20%
Accepting it and getting on	1%	6%	30%	43%	20%
Actively doing something about it	1%	5%	31%	47%	17%
Being critical and blaming myself	4%	14%	39%	27%	16%
Trying to see the positive side	4%	12%	34%	38%	12%
Getting support from people I know	7%	18%	45%	22%	9%
Making light of the situation	5%	14%	43%	31%	7%
Finding comfort in my faith/religion	59%	15%	14%	7%	5%
Doing other things to take mind off it	10%	12%	53%	22%	4%
Getting angry about the problem	10%	30%	46%	12%	4%
Giving up trying to deal with it	19%	32%	36%	10%	4%
Seeking help & advice from experts	21%	29%	36%	11%	3%
Denying that the problem exists	29%	28%	30%	10%	3%
Getting annoyed / taking out others	28%	35%	32%	4%	2%
Using alcohol or drugs to cope/forget	59%	16%	21%	4%	1%

Three coping strategies seem to be widely used by single parents in Scotland, with around two thirds of single parents using them at least “most” if not “all” of the time. Accepting the issue and getting on with it, making plans about what to do, and actively doing something about it, are each widely used. Interestingly, these are very different approaches, which may suggest that different types of strategy are used, depending on the challenge that is being faced.

Enduring problems was also perceived to be a key coping strategy among the interviewees but varied depending on the issues at hand. For example, while most interviewees stated that they often had no choice but to get on with it, others sought medical support or took action by volunteering. While many of the interviewees often adopted a get on with it attitude, several also used denial as strategy:

“I dae struggle to be honest. Like I’m a nightmare wae letters [bills] I can just shove them to the side and put them right to the back of ma head until it comes to that point. where I’m in such a mess that I need to deal with it and I don’t know why but I just continue to do that throughout my life.”

## Findings - Are there key differences among single parents?

We found that some single parents are more likely than others to cope with problems by ‘denying that a problem exists’. Younger single parents, those not in a relationship and those in households where disability was present was all more likely to ‘deny that problems exist’

	How often did single parents deny a problem existed	
	<i>Never or rarely</i>	<i>Sometimes, most of the time, or all of the time</i>
<b>Age</b>		
Under 30s	48%	52%
30s	57%	43%
40s	61%	39%
50s and older	71%	29%
<b>Relationship Status</b>		
In a relationship	66%	34%
Not in a relationship	55%	45%
<b>Disability in the household</b>		
Neither self or children has a disability	63%	37%
Either adult or child has a disability	55%	45%
Both adult and child have a disability	37%	63%

## Findings - Are single parents different?

The COPE inventory tends to be used to explore coping mechanisms in relation to particular stressful situations or medical conditions. For example, studies have examined how parents cope with being a parent of a child with Downs Syndrome, ADHD, autism, intellectual disabilities, birth of a child with a disability, etc. It is difficult to find studies which use the COPE inventory to consider how coping strategies are deployed to manage everyday challenges, such as those faced by single parents as a whole. To this end, it is not yet sensible to draw conclusions as to whether the coping strategies that are being deployed by single parents in Scotland to meet the challenges of single parenthood are typical or not of those used among the wider population. This paper aims to open up the issue to encourage further research in order to better understand and support single parents in Scotland.

## Conclusion

In brief, the coping mechanisms used by single parents in Scotland tend to be more individual based in the sense that the approach taken is to reflect and look for personal solutions rather than seek help or advice. These findings echo those from much earlier studies. When added to the growing pressures that single parents face on a day to day basis, there is a need to address the gap between single parents coping on their own and accessing advice that can ultimately help improve how they deal with the challenges that they face.

## Referencing this paper

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