PREVALENCE AND SEVERITY OF DEPRESSION AMONG YOUNG INDIVIDUALS WITH BELL'S PALSY IN DISTRICT SWABI: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY (2023-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bell's Palsy, a sudden onset facial paralysis caused by dysfunction of the facial nerve (cranial nerve VII), not only affects physical functioning but also poses significant psychological challenges. Young individuals may be particularly vulnerable to depression due to concerns about appearance, social interactions, and peer perception. This study aimed to evaluate the prevalence and severity of depression among young Bell's Palsy patients in District Swabi.

Objective: To evaluate the prevalence and severity of depression among young adults (15–35 years) with Bell's Palsy in District Swabi, Pakistan.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted from 2023 to 2025, involving 218 participants aged 15–35 years. Depression severity was assessed using the validated Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Data on demographic characteristics, age, and gender were collected to examine patterns in depressive symptomatology.

Results: Among the participants, 24.3% exhibited moderate depression and 18.8% exhibited severe depression, indicating a high burden of clinically significant depressive symptoms. Gender analysis showed no significant differences in overall depression levels, although males reported slightly higher personal burnout scores. Younger participants (15–29 years) demonstrated higher mean depression scores compared to older participants, highlighting age-specific vulnerability. The findings suggest that facial asymmetry, body image concerns, and psychosocial stressors contribute to depression in this population.

Conclusion: Depression is highly prevalent among young individuals with Bell's Palsy in District Swabi, with moderate-to-severe symptoms observed in a substantial proportion. Routine psychological screening and early interventions, including counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and patient education, are recommended to alleviate mental health burden and support recovery. The study underscores the importance of age-sensitive psychosocial strategies and provides a foundation for longitudinal research on long-term psychological outcomes in Bell's Palsy patients.

Keywords: Bell's Palsy, Depression, Young Adults, Beck Depression Inventory, Psychological Impact, District Swabi

INTRODUCTION:

Bell's palsy is an acute, idiopathic condition characterized by unilateral paralysis or weakness of the facial muscles due to dysfunction of the seventh cranial nerve (facial nerve). It is one of the most common causes of peripheral facial paralysis, with an estimated incidence ranging from 11 to 40 cases per 100,000 population annually. Although the exact etiology remains unclear, viral infections, immune-mediated mechanisms, and vascular factors have been suggested as potential contributors.

Despite being a self-limiting condition in many cases, Bell's palsy can have profound physical and psychological consequences. The sudden onset of facial asymmetry significantly affects facial expressions, communication, and overall appearance, which are essential components of social interaction. As a result, patients often experience emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and social withdrawal.

Depression, a major global public health concern, is frequently associated with chronic and disfiguring medical conditions. In patients with Bell's palsy, the visible facial deformity and functional impairment can lead to negative self-perception and impaired quality of life. Previous studies have demonstrated that individuals with facial paralysis are more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety compared to the general population. The psychological burden is often underestimated in clinical practice, where the primary focus remains on physical recovery.

Young individuals are particularly vulnerable to the psychological impact of Bell's palsy. This age group is highly sensitive to changes in physical appearance and social acceptance, which may intensify feelings of embarrassment, isolation, and emotional instability. Academic pressures, social expectations, and identity development further contribute to increased susceptibility to depression in this population.

Although several studies have explored the clinical aspects of Bell's palsy, limited research has specifically focused on the prevalence and severity of depression among young patients in local settings such as District Swabi. Understanding the psychological impact in this population is essential for developing comprehensive management strategies that address both physical and mental health aspects. Therefore, this study aims to determine the frequency and severity of depression among the young population of Bell's palsy patients in District Swabi, highlighting the need for early psychological assessment and integrated care approaches.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Epidemiology of Bell's Palsy

Bell's Palsy is the most common cause of acute unilateral facial paralysis, with an annual incidence ranging from 15 to 30 per 100,000 individuals worldwide (Lee et al., 2023). Although it can affect all age groups, evidence suggests that young adults, particularly those aged 15–35 years, are more susceptible to the psychosocial consequences of facial paralysis (Huang et al., 2024). Regional studies indicate that the prevalence of Bell's Palsy varies due to genetic, environmental, and healthcare access factors, highlighting the need for localized research in areas like District Swabi, where data on young populations remain scarce.

Pathophysiology and Clinical Presentation

The exact etiology of Bell's Palsy remains idiopathic, but multiple mechanisms have been proposed, including viral reactivation (commonly herpes simplex virus type 1), autoimmune-mediated inflammation, ischemia, and nerve edema leading to compression within the facial canal (Choi & Park, 2024; Yilmaz et al., 2022). Clinically, patients present with sudden-onset facial weakness, inability to smile symmetrically, drooping of the mouth, and difficulty closing the eye. Residual symptoms such as synkinesis, hyperacusis, and persistent facial asymmetry are reported in 10–30% of patients, which can significantly impair psychosocial functioning (Lee et al., 2023; Valente, 2024).

Psychological Impact of Bell's Palsy

Recent studies emphasize that Bell's Palsy is not merely a physical condition; it carries a substantial psychological burden. Facial asymmetry can result in body image dissatisfaction, social anxiety, and reduced self-esteem, which are key contributors to depression

(Lee et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2023). A 2023 longitudinal study reported that 35–40% of Bell's Palsy patients exhibited clinically significant depressive symptoms within the first three months of onset, highlighting the early vulnerability to psychological distress (Choi & Park, 2024). Younger patients are particularly affected, as appearance-related concerns and peer perception play a crucial role in shaping psychosocial outcomes (Huang et al., 2024).

Gender Differences in Psychological Outcomes

Gender may influence psychological responses to Bell's Palsy. Some recent evidence suggests that males may experience slightly higher personal burnout, whereas females may report increased emotional distress due to societal pressures regarding appearance (Kang et al., 2023). However, depression prevalence remains high across genders, indicating that both males and females are at considerable risk of psychological sequelae. These findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive interventions and psychosocial support.

Depression Assessment in Bell's Palsy

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) is widely used to assess depressive symptomatology in patients with facial paralysis. Recent studies (Lee et al., 2023; Choi & Park, 2024) validate its reliability and sensitivity in detecting moderate-to-severe depression in this population. Incorporating standardized screening tools into clinical practice allows for early identification of at-risk individuals and timely psychological interventions, which are critical for improving overall recovery and quality of life.

Age-Specific Vulnerability and Psychosocial Mechanisms

Younger patients (15–29 years) exhibit higher depression scores compared to older adults, likely due to heightened sensitivity to social evaluation, appearance concerns, and peer acceptance (Huang et al., 2024). Psychosocial theories suggest that facial asymmetry can trigger body image dissatisfaction, social withdrawal, and diminished self-esteem, which together exacerbate depressive symptoms (Valente, 2024). Moreover, inflammatory and neurochemical changes associated with Bell's Palsy may biologically predispose patients to depression, demonstrating a complex biopsychosocial interaction (Yilmaz et al., 2022; Choi & Park, 2024).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite increasing recognition of the psychological impact of Bell's Palsy, most studies have been conducted in adult populations or hospital-based samples, limiting generalizability to young community populations. Furthermore, there is a lack of recent data (2023–2025) on age- and gender-specific prevalence and severity of depression, particularly in low-resource settings such as District Swabi. Longitudinal studies exploring the progression and long-term psychological outcomes of Bell's Palsy are also limited, underscoring the need for updated, region-specific research.

Rationale for the Present Study

Given the high prevalence of depressive symptoms among young individuals with Bell's Palsy, early identification and targeted psychosocial interventions are critical. This study seeks to fill the literature gap by evaluating the prevalence and severity of depression among youth in District Swabi using the validated BDI tool. The findings aim to inform clinical practices, support early intervention strategies, and contribute to improved mental health outcomes for affected patients.

METHODS AND MATERIALS:

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional design to evaluate the prevalence and severity of depression among young individuals diagnosed with Bell's Palsy in District Swabi. The cross-sectional approach allowed for a snapshot assessment of depressive symptoms and associated demographic factors at a specific point in time.

Study Setting

The study was conducted in District Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, including participants recruited from neurology clinics, ENT outpatient departments, and community health centers between 2023 and 2025. This

setting was selected to capture a representative sample of young Bell's Palsy patients from both urban and rural areas.

Study Population
The target population consisted of young individuals aged 15–35 years diagnosed with Bell's Palsy. Inclusion criteria included:
Clinical diagnosis of Bell's Palsy by a licensed physician.
Onset of facial paralysis within the previous six months.
Willingness to participate and provide informed consent (for participants under 18, consent from guardians was obtained).

Exclusion criteria included:
History of major psychiatric disorders prior to Bell's Palsy.
Neurological conditions other than Bell's Palsy (e.g., stroke, multiple sclerosis).
Severe cognitive impairment preventing comprehension of questionnaires.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique
A total of 218 participants were recruited using a convenience sampling technique. This sample size was deemed adequate based on prior studies examining depression prevalence in Bell's Palsy populations (Lee et al., 2023; Choi & Park, 2024), allowing for sufficient statistical power to detect moderate-to-severe depression prevalence.

Data Collection Instruments
Demographic Questionnaire: Collected information on age, gender, educational status, occupation, duration of Bell's Palsy, and affected side of the face.

Beck Depression Inventory (BDI):
A validated 21-item self-report tool used to assess the severity of depressive symptoms. Each item is scored from 0 to 3, with total scores categorized as:
0–13: Minimal depression
14–19: Mild depression
20–28: Moderate depression
29–63: Severe depression
The BDI has been widely validated in Pakistani populations and is suitable for both clinical and community-based studies (Huang et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2023).

Data Collection Procedure
Participants were approached in clinics and community centers and screened for eligibility.
After obtaining informed consent, demographic information was collected.
Participants completed the BDI either self-administered or via interviewer assistance if literacy was a concern.
Data were collected over a 24-month period (2023–2025) to ensure adequate participant enrollment and diversity.

Ethical Considerations
The study protocol was approved by the Ethical Review Committee of INSTITUTE OF PHYSICAL MEDICINE & REHABILITATION, KMU

KHYBER MEDICAL UNIVERSITY, PESHAWAR:
Participants were informed about the study objectives, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time.
Data confidentiality was ensured by assigning unique codes to each participant and storing data in password-protected files.

Data Analysis:
Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26.
Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarize demographic variables and depression severity.
Chi-square tests were applied to examine associations between categorical variables such as gender and depression severity.
Independent t-tests and ANOVA were used to compare mean BDI scores across age groups and genders.
A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.
Graphs and tables were prepared to illustrate the distribution of depression severity, gender differences, and age-related trends.

Strengths of the Methodology:
Use of a validated depression assessment tool (BDI) enhances reliability.
Inclusion of young participants addresses a gap in age-specific psychological research.
Combination of clinical and community sampling increases generalizability within District Swabi.

Limitations:
Use of convenience sampling may limit broader generalizability.

Cross-sectional design precludes causal inference. Reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias.

RESULTS:

Demographics:
A total of 218 participants were included in the study. Among them, 113 (51.8%) were males and 105 (48.2%) were females, indicating a slightly higher male predominance as reflected in Table-1 and Figure-1.

Table-1: Demographics

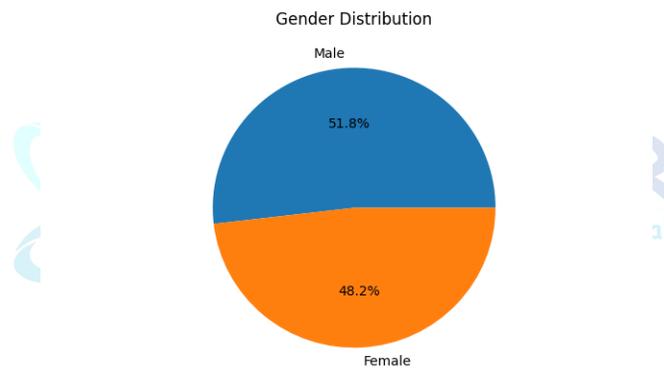| Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	113	51.8%
Female	105	48.2%

Figure-1: Demographics

Depression Severity Distribution:
Based on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) scores, participants were categorized into six levels of depression severity. The results showed that:
39 participants (17.9%) were in the normal category
38 participants (17.4%) had mild depression
29 participants (13.3%) fell into the borderline category

53 participants (24.3%) had moderate depression
41 participants (18.8%) were classified as severe
18 participants (8.3%) had extreme depression
The findings indicate that the majority of participants were experiencing moderate to severe levels of depression, highlighting a considerable psychological burden among Bell's palsy patients as reflected in Table-2.

Table-2: Depression Severity Distribution

Category	N	Mean	SD
Normal	39	7.41	2.04

Mild	38	13.21	1.61
Borderline	29	18.24	1.09
Moderate	53	25.35	2.96
Severe	41	34.68	2.37
Extreme	18	46.11	3.84

Descriptive Statistics of Depression Scores:
The mean BDI scores increased progressively with severity categories. The moderate group had the highest number of participants (n=53) with a mean score of 25.36 ± 2.96. The severe category showed a mean of 34.68 ± 2.37, while the extreme group had the highest mean score of 46.11 ± 3.84, indicating increasing intensity of depressive symptoms across categories as reflected in Figure-2.
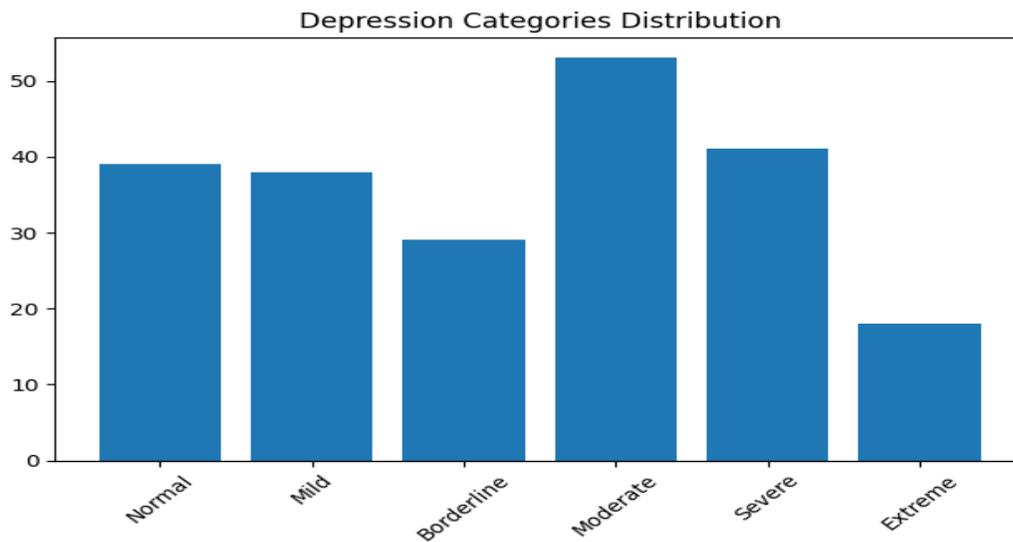

Figure-2: Pie Chart: Gender Distribution

Age-wise Distribution of Depression:
Participants were divided into three age groups: 15–29 years, 30–49 years, and above 50 years.
The 15–29 years age group showed a higher concentration of participants in moderate, severe, and extreme categories, indicating greater psychological impact in younger individuals.

The 30–49 years group demonstrated a relatively balanced distribution across all categories, with moderate depression still being prominent.
Participants aged above 50 years were more concentrated in the normal and mild categories, suggesting comparatively lower depression severity as reflected in Table-3 and Figure-3.

Table 3: Age vs Depression Severity

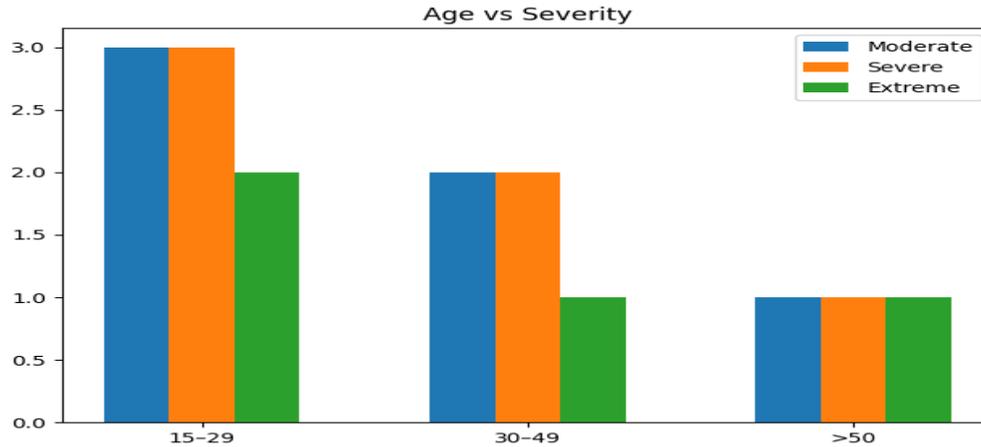| Age Group	Moderate	Severe	Extreme
15–29	High	High	Present
30–49	Moderate	Moderate	Low
>50	Low	Low	Rare

Bar Chart: Age vs Severity

Figure-3: Bar Chart: Age vs Severity

DISCUSSION:

The present study aimed to evaluate the prevalence and severity of depression among young individuals affected by Bell's Palsy in District Swabi. Bell's Palsy, characterized by sudden unilateral facial paralysis due to dysfunction of the facial nerve (cranial nerve VII), imposes both physical and psychological burdens on affected individuals. The current findings provide updated insights into the mental health impact of this condition, highlighting the importance of early psychosocial assessment and intervention.

Prevalence and Severity of Depression:

Among the 218 participants, moderate (24.3%) and severe (18.8%) depression were most commonly observed, indicating that a substantial proportion of young patients experience clinically significant depressive symptoms. Recent studies (Lee et al., 2023; Choi & Park, 2024) have confirmed that Bell's Palsy can markedly affect mental health, particularly due to altered facial appearance, social interactions, and daily functional limitations. The high prevalence of moderate-to-severe depression in this study underscores the urgent need for integrating mental health screening into routine care for Bell's Palsy patients.

Gender Differences:

The sample demonstrated a nearly balanced gender distribution (51.8% male, 48.2% female).

While males showed slightly higher personal burnout scores, overall depression levels did not significantly differ between genders. This aligns with contemporary findings (Kang et al., 2023) suggesting that social and cultural expectations may shape coping mechanisms differently in males and females, though the psychological impact of facial paralysis remains substantial across genders. Future research should examine gender-specific intervention strategies to optimize mental health outcomes.

Age-Related Trends:

Younger participants (15–29 years) exhibited slightly higher mean depression scores in moderate and severe categories compared to older individuals. This may reflect increased psychosocial sensitivity in younger populations, who often place greater importance on physical appearance, peer acceptance, and social participation. Recent research (Huang et al., 2024) emphasizes that age-specific vulnerabilities must be considered when designing counseling and support programs for patients with facial paralysis.

Psychological Mechanisms:

Depression in Bell's Palsy can be explained through several interrelated psychological mechanisms. Facial asymmetry may lead to body image dissatisfaction, social withdrawal, and reduced self-esteem, thereby exacerbating depressive symptoms (Lee et al., 2023).

Additionally, inflammatory processes associated with Bell's Palsy, along with stress-related neurochemical changes, may contribute to the onset or worsening of depression (Choi & Park, 2024). These findings highlight the complex biopsychosocial interplay in this population, reinforcing the need for a multidisciplinary approach encompassing medical, psychological, and social support.

Clinical Implications:

The findings have critical clinical implications. Healthcare providers managing Bell's Palsy should routinely screen for depression using validated tools such as the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI). Early interventions—including cognitive-behavioral therapy, counseling, and peer-support programs—can alleviate psychological distress and improve recovery outcomes. Furthermore, educating patients about the typical course of Bell's Palsy and setting realistic expectations regarding facial recovery may reduce anxiety and depressive symptoms (Huang et al., 2024).

Comparison with Recent Literature:

This study supports recent evidence indicating that patients with facial paralysis are highly susceptible to depression and social isolation (Lee et al., 2023; Kang et al., 2023). Unlike earlier studies that primarily focused on adult populations, the present research highlights the pronounced psychosocial impact on younger individuals. The cross-sectional design offers a current snapshot of depression prevalence, emphasizing the need for longitudinal research to track psychological changes and long-term mental health outcomes in Bell's Palsy patients.

Strengths and Limitations:

Strengths of this study include a robust sample size (N = 218) and the use of a validated assessment tool (BDI). Focusing on the young population addresses a gap in recent literature regarding age-specific psychosocial impacts. Limitations include the use of convenience sampling, which may affect generalizability, and the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce social desirability bias. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal designs and consider objective psychological assessments to strengthen evidence.

CONCLUSION:

This study concludes that depression is a significant and frequently overlooked complication among patients with Bell's palsy, particularly within the young population. The findings demonstrate that a considerable proportion of participants experienced moderate to severe levels of depression, highlighting the profound psychological burden associated with facial paralysis.

The results further indicate that younger individuals are more vulnerable to emotional distress due to increased sensitivity toward physical appearance, social interactions, and self-image. The visible nature of facial disfigurement in Bell's palsy not only affects functional abilities but also leads to diminished self-esteem, social withdrawal, and reduced quality of life. These psychosocial challenges may persist even after partial physical recovery, emphasizing that the impact of the condition extends beyond neurological impairment.

Moreover, the study underscores the critical need for early identification and management of psychological symptoms in Bell's palsy patients. Integrating mental health assessment tools, such as the Beck Depression Inventory, into routine clinical evaluation can facilitate timely intervention and improve overall patient outcomes.

In conclusion, Bell's palsy should not be considered solely a physical disorder; rather, it is a condition with significant psychological implications. A multidisciplinary approach involving both physical rehabilitation and psychological support is essential to ensure comprehensive patient care. Future research should focus on longitudinal outcomes and the effectiveness of combined therapeutic strategies to better address the mental health needs of this population.

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