

# **COPING WITH STRESS**

**CC-10 (Health Psychology) Unit 2; SEM III**

**By**

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# COPING WITH STRESS

Coping has been defined by Lazarus and colleagues as the process of managing stressors that have been appraised as taxing or exceeding a person's resources and as the 'efforts to manage . . . environmental and internal demands' (Lazarus and Launier 1978).

In the context of stress, coping therefore reflects the ways in which individuals interact with stressors in an attempt to return to some sort of normal functioning. This might involve correcting or removing the problem. Or it might involve changing the way a person thinks about the problem or learning to tolerate and accept it.

Coping with relationship conflict could involve leaving the relationship or developing strategies to make the relationship better.

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) emphasized the dynamic nature of coping which involves appraisal and reappraisal, evaluation and reevaluation. Lazarus's model of stress emphasized the interaction between person and their environment.

Coping is also seen as a similar interaction between the person and the stressor.



Cohen and Lazarus(1979) defined the goals of coping as the following:

- To reduce stressful environmental conditions and maximize the chance of recovery;
- To adjust or tolerate negative events;
- To maintain a positive self-image;
- To maintain emotional equilibrium; and
- To continue satisfying relationship with others.

## **Ways of coping**

Researchers have described different types of coping. Some differentiate between approach and avoidance coping, whilst others describe emotion focused and problem focused coping.

### **Approach versus avoidance**

Roth and Cohen (1986) defined two basic modes of coping, approach and avoidance.

Approach coping involves confronting the problem, gathering information and taking direct action. In contrast avoidant coping involves minimizing the importance of the event. People tend to show one form of coping or the other although it is possible for someone to manage one type of problem by denying it and other by making specific plans.

Some researchers have argued that approach coping is consistently more adaptive than avoidant coping.

# **Problem focused versus emotion focused (also known-as instrumentality – emotionality)**

The problem and emotion focused dimensions reflect types of coping strategies rather than opposing styles. People can show both problem focused coping and emotional focused coping when facing a stressful event.

## **Problem focused coping**

This involves attempts to take action to either reduce the demands of the stressor or to increase the resources available to manage it. Examples of problem focused coping include devising a revision plan and sticking to it, setting an agenda for a busy day, studying for extra qualifications to enable a career change and organizing counseling for a failing relationship.

## **Emotion focused coping**

This involves attempts to manage the emotions evoked by the stressful event. People use both behavioral and cognitive strategies to regulate their emotions. Examples of behavioral strategies include talking to friends about a problem, turning to drink or smoking more or getting distracted by shopping or watching a film.

# Type of problem

Work problems seem to evoke more problem focused coping whereas health and relationship problems tend to evoke emotion focused coping(Vitaliano et al. 1990).

**Age:** Children tend to use more problem focused coping strategies whereas emotion focused strategies seems to develop in adolescence (Compas et al. 1991, 1996). Folk man et al. (1987) reported that middle aged men and women tended to use problem focused coping whereas the elderly used emotion focused coping.

**Gender:** It is generally believed that women use more emotion focused coping and that men are more problem focused. Some research supports this belief. For example, Stone and Neale (1984) considered coping with daily events and reported that men were more likely to direct action than women. However, Folk man and Lazarus (1980) and Hamilton and Fagot (1988) found no gender differences.

**Controllability:** People tend to use problem focused coping if they believe that the problem itself can be changed. In contrast they use more emotion focused coping if the problem is perceived as being out of their control (Lazarus and Folk man 1987).

# Measuring coping

**Active coping** (e.g. 'I've been taking action to try to make the situation better')

**Planning** (e.g. 'I've been trying to come up with a strategy about what to do')

**Positive reframing** (e.g. 'I've been looking for something good in what is happening')

**Self-distraction** (e.g. 'I've been turning to work or other activities to take my mind off things')

**Using emotional support** (e.g. 'I've been getting emotional support from others')

**Substance use** (e.g. 'I've been using alcohol or other drugs to help me get through it')

**Behavioral disengagement** (e.g. 'I've been giving up trying to deal with it')

**Denial** (e.g. 'I've been saying to myself "this isn't real"')

**Self-control** (e.g. 'I tried to keep my feelings to myself') **Distancing** (e.g. 'I didn't let it get to me. I refused to think about it too much')

**Escape/avoidance** (e.g. 'I wished that the situation would go away').

## **Coping and the stressor**

According to Lazarus and colleagues one of the goals of coping is to minimize the stressor. Much research has addressed the impact of coping on the physiological and self-report dimensions of the stress response.

## **Coping and the stress illness**

Some research indicates that coping styles may moderate the association between stress and illness. For some studies the outcome variable has been more psychological in its emphasis and has taken the form of wellbeing, psychological distress or adjustment.

## **Coping and positive outcomes**

Over recent years there has been an increasing recognition that stressful events such as life events and illness may not only result in negative outcomes but may also lead to some positive changes in people lives. This phenomenon has been given a range of names including stress related growth (Park et al. 1996), benefit finding (Tennen and Affleck 1999), meaning making (Park and Folk-man 1997) and growth orientated functioning and crisis growth (Holahan et al. 1996).



**Thank  
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