Introduction

While the concept of coping is not a new one, it wasn’t until the growing interest in stress emerged in the 1960s and 70s that the coping became a popular construct of interest to psychologists. It was at that time that mental health researchers and practitioners began systematically examining the ways that people emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally responded to stress and conflict. Current research on coping assumes the view that the environment and person interact dynamically. That is, the choice of coping style is based on the appraisal made in the moment and the extent of the options available at that time (Lazarus, 1993). Individuals draw upon a wide range of coping strategies when dealing with people or situations that invoke negative responses such as anger, fear, or anxiety (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). Successful coping strategies are capable of mediating negative affect and cognitive appraisals of the event, ultimately affecting both short-term functioning and long-term physical and mental health.

Definition

Coping has been defined as the process of attempting to reduce distress associated with threat, harm, or loss (Carver & Conner-Smith, 2010). Individuals engage in a variety of strategies to manage negative thoughts and emotions. Coping is not a unidimensional construct; it encompasses relatively stable coping styles as well as coping responses employed in specific stressful encounters. Researchers have adopted two basic approaches to coping; one emphasizes style while the other emphasizes process.

Keywords
Stress, health, coping mechanism

Traditional debates

Early coping research and theory focused on the use of specific defense mechanisms in response to distress. Defense mechanisms were seen as stable aspects of one’s personality that dictated consistently adaptive or maladaptive responses to stressful events. From this preliminary research rooted in psychoanalytic theory came the stylistic approach to coping. The stylistic approach concentrates on a hierarchy of coping responses, some more effective than others, implying a standard measure of the effectiveness of coping responses. Stylistic approaches to coping were assessed in order to determine a person’s general coping style; however, research revealed that the way an individual copes on average tends to be a poor predictor of how he or she will cope with a specific stressful encounter. Lazarus (1993) critiqued the stylistic approach for lack of focus on the environmental factors that affect choice of coping style, arguing that the connection to the Freudian theory of psychopathology and defense mechanisms were a “bit too neat for it to be generally applicable—it is more a conceptual ideal rather than a clinical reality” (Lazarus, 1993, p. 367). Therefore, a complementary body of research was developed to better understand the process by which individuals evaluate the best possible range of responses to specific stressful encounters.
The transactional theory or process approach proposed by Richard Lazarus concentrates on the interaction between two components—cognitive appraisal and coping (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). According to this theory, appraisals occur when a person assesses a particular situation to determine whether or not it is applicable to his or her health. Following the appraisal process, people draw upon a wide range of cognitive and behavioral strategies to manage stress. While people generally use a variety of coping strategies, some strategies are more consistently used in certain settings than others. The particular characteristics of a stressful situation can influence coping effectiveness as well as coping choice.

Whether or not a particular coping strategy is adaptive will depend on the person, the environment, and the relationship between the two. The stylistic and process approaches have complementary strengths in describing the concept of coping, thus coping can only be fully understood in a framework that incorporates both perspectives. The stylistic approach emphasizes personality traits, while the process approach emphasizes contextual influences on coping. To understand how individuals cope both over time and across stressful encounters, both perspectives should be considered.

Another major division in coping research is the distinction between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. According to the process approach to coping, coping involves both efforts to alter the stressful situation as well as efforts to regulate the emotional distress associated with the situation. The function of problem-focused coping is to change the distressed person-environment relationship by acting on the environment or oneself. Behaviors or thoughts that work to remove whatever potentially negative event a person may be facing are at the heart of problem-focused coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989); adaptive behaviors include seeking information, planning, and taking action (Smith & Kirby, 2009). In contrast, emotion-focused coping involves changing perceptions or thoughts to handle the situation. Responses associated with emotion-focused coping include seeking out emotional social support, denial, and optimistic reevaluation. Neither problem-focused coping nor emotion-focused coping can be seen as better than the other; the context of the situation determines which approach would be more useful. When stressful conditions are seen as controllable by action, problem-focused coping prevails; when stressful conditions are seen as unable to be changed, emotion-focused coping is more likely to be employed (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Most environmental stressors elicit the use of both coping strategies, and both forms can be successful in reducing psychological distress.

Coping strategies, often divided into engagement and disengagement coping, can be either beneficial or harmful to a person’s emotional well-being (Carver & Scheier, 1994). Ideally, coping strategies will mediate or moderate stress. Nevertheless, because specific coping styles are often associated with certain personality types, coping strategies have the potential to be useful in the short term but maladaptive in the long-term (e.g., neurotic personality types utilizing disengagement strategies such as escape and avoidance). In order to counteract long-term negative effects, a person might use several coping strategies over time; for example, using avoidance until one is psychologically ready to engage in planning and taking action. The idea of coping flexibility has increasingly become the focus of recent studies. According to Tsukasa Kato (2012), coping flexibility refers to a person’s ability to adjust ineffective or negative coping styles to a more successful method after evaluation. Coping flexibility is imperative when a
situation is not resolved by initial coping responses. Coping flexibility actions include understanding, monitoring, and assessing coping conditions and outcomes. Furthermore, a person’s ability to alter coping efforts may lead to increased psychological or emotional benefits (Thoits, 1995).

In addition to personality effects, there are reported gender differences in choice of coping strategy. Women tend to utilize strategies such as seeking social support and distraction from the stressor more often than men; whereas men tend to attempt to control their emotions and engage in planful problem-solving more often than women (Thoits, 1995). Interestingly, reveals that it is the belief that social and emotional support exists that has the direct coping benefit, over the actual existence of that support. People who believe they options for socioemotional support tend to see a significant reduction in the negative effects of stress (Thoits, 1995). It is apparent that external factors (e.g., support) might have as much of an effect on a person’s ability to cope, as do internal factors (e.g., personality).

Critical Debates

Based on the complexity of coping, many have debated certain dynamics of the concept. Two major issues that have arisen are the accuracy of measurement and its effectiveness. Initially, coping has been measured by via self-report, which raises the issue of accuracy in retrospective recall (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The length of time between an event and recall of that event has a direct negative effect on the reliability of recall. Researchers have called for more effective measurements in order to counteract the effects of reconstructed memories (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Another current critical debate is whether the present research can be generalized to all social groups and personality types (Hagger, 2009). Contemporary researchers argue that attempts to specify treatments, interventions, and understandings to any specific section of the public must take into consideration the variability that exists between and within social groups (Hagger, 2009).

References


**Online Resources**

[Childhood coping leads to adult resilience](#)

[Coping with stress: What does love have to do with it?](#)

[NBC News story on dissociative amnesia (1994)](#)

[NIMH - Coping with traumatic events](#)