

Stress and coping in the workplace

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment – Marcus Aurelius (AD121–180)

THE corporate workplace is filled with stress, anxiety, deadlines, pressure, success and failure. The highest individual and organisational performers are able to cope with the fast-changing environment to succeed and achieve high-performing results. In this article I outline the history behind stress and coping research and how these strategies and mechanisms may be applicable in the workplace.

Psychologists who deal with individuals who are continually in stressful environments need to be aware of the latest information on coping mechanisms and strategies. This is an area of research at the boundaries of occupational, clinical and health psychology – successful coping strategies can improve not only work performance and productivity but also health and well-being, not only in working environments but also in daily living.

Defining coping

Coping is defined as thoughts and behaviours that people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping research is important because it may help explain why some people fare better than others when encountering stress in their lives. Factors such as personality, culture, prior experience and environment contribute to an individual's response. Unlike these other factors, however, coping lends itself to cognitive and behavioural intervention (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). This



MARK KOVACS on a forward-thinking approach to the daily grind.

allows the individual to develop techniques and strategies to deal with situations that might be considered stressful.

Coping as it relates to stress

Perceived stress is often defined as a condition subjectively experienced by respondents who identify an imbalance between demands addressed to them and the resources available to them to counter these demands (Lazarus, 1990).

The literature shows that stressful conditions do not produce dependable effects in participants. For some people stress aroused by a given condition was great, while for others it was small. Under some stressful conditions, depending on the task, the performance for a few people was markedly impaired. For others it was improved, and for others it had no observable effect (Lazarus & Eriksen, 1952). As psychological stress defines an unfavourable situation, we alter our circumstances, or how they are interpreted, to make them appear more favourable – we cope.

In a 1950 address, Hans Selye stimulated great interest in the overlap between physiological and psychological stress. Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) emphasised that any noxious agent to the tissues (a stressor) would produce more or less the same physiological defence (stress reaction) (Selye, 1956). The GAS could be thought of as the physiological analogue of the psychological concept of coping. Selye's research later made the distinction between the types of stress. 'Eustress' was the good type of stress, theoretically associated with positive feelings and healthy physiological responses. 'Distress' was the downside, associated with negative feelings and disturbed bodily states (Selye, 1974).

Lazarus also made a distinction

between different types of stress. He defined three specific types of stress: harm, threat and challenge (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). 'Harm' referred to psychological damage that had already been done (e.g. failing to meet an important deadline, which results in losing a million-dollar client). 'Threat' is the anticipation of harm that has not yet taken place, but may be imminent. 'Challenge' results from difficult demands that we feel confident about overcoming by effectively mobilising and deploying our coping resources.

Job stress vs. combat stress

Typical job stressors seen in the work environment – such as time-sensitive project deadlines, office politics, insincere/negative managers, important job presentations and meetings – can produce similar physiological and psychological responses to that experienced by war veterans' responses to combat 'stress' (Grinker & Spiegel, 1945). This inability for the human body to successfully differentiate between serious stressors (e.g. combat stress) and everyday stressors (e.g. deadlines or presentations) can lead to severe problems, both in work productivity and well-being. Combat stress can

WEBLINKS

Job stress management: www.helpguide.org/mental/work_stress_management.htm

American Psychological Association: www.apa.org/topics/topicstress.html

and usually does have longer-term effects on the individual and can result in post-traumatic stress disorder; whereas individual issues that cause work stress are forgotten in hours or days, but replaced with new stressors.

How people cope

Individuals may cope with the same stressor in vastly different ways. Researchers have looked at different methods that individuals employ to cope with situations, and although there has been some debate about the language used to define these coping strategies, similar themes are seen throughout the coping research (see box). Although different researchers use slightly different terminology to define the major methods people use to cope with adversity, failure and stressful situations, there does appear to be a common thread in the research. Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to use a combination from Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Higgins and Endler (1995).

1. Problem-focused coping – changing our environment to reduce the stress;
2. Emotion-focused coping – changing our response to the stress; and
3. Avoidance-focused coping – not exposing ourselves to stressful situations; which could be positive or negative depending on whether the task is simply avoided (negative) or the task

is performed in such a method that avoids the possibility of the negative stressor (positive).

Proactive coping

Although the concept of threat – anticipated harm or loss – is central to cognitive theories of stress, the majority of studies have focused on retrospective coping or coping with events in the present (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). However, a new development in the coping literature is taking a more forward-thinking approach.

Coping with imminent stressors, such as upcoming presentations, meetings or even an impending lay-off, has been termed ‘proactive coping’ (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997). This proactive coping model is defined by five interrelated components:

- the importance of building a reserve of resources (including temporal, financial and social resources) that can be used to prevent or offset future net losses;
- recognising potential stressors;
- initial appraisals of potential stressors;
- preliminary coping efforts; and
- eliciting and using feedback about the success of one’s efforts.

How can this information help individuals pre-empt potentially stressful situations and handle them in a calm, relaxed, efficient way which produces a positive result?

Individuals with a proactive personality have greater career success than individuals who are not proactive – research has demonstrated that tangible benefits, such as higher salaries, more frequent promotions and more job satisfaction, are associated with a proactive disposition (Seibert *et al.*, 1999). Developing a proactive disposition is vital for both work and life success.

This proactive personality has been consistently linked with specific personality traits,

CONCEPTIONS OF COPING

Lazarus and colleagues defined two forms of coping:

1. Problem-focused coping – changing the environment to reduce the stress; and
2. Emotion-focused coping – changing our response to or interpretation of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Billings and Moss (1981) proposed a three-factor model of conception of coping consisting of:

1. Active coping (e.g. tried to see the positive side; considering several alternatives);
2. Active behavioural (e.g. talked with a friend, tried to find out more about the situation); and
3. Avoidance.

Amirkhan (1990) developed the ‘Coping Strategy Indicator’ by starting with 161 coping responses.

Principal-factor analysis produced a three-factor solution of:

1. Problem-solving;
2. Seeking support; and
3. Avoidance.

Higgins and Endler (1995) grouped coping strategies into three main classes:

1. Task-oriented;
2. Emotion-oriented; and
3. Avoidance-oriented.

such as conscientiousness and extraversion (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 1995; Crant & Bateman, 2000).

Conscientiousness comprises two related facets: achievement and dependability. Individuals high in Conscientiousness tend to be very task-focused rather than interpersonally or relationship-focused. Highly conscientious people are driven by a need for structure and tend to be intolerant of ambiguity and derive satisfaction from having control over their environment (Costa & McCrae, 1988). Conscientiousness has been consistently linked to performance and is considered the one personality trait that is the best predictor of job performance and career success across many different domains (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Barrick *et al.*, 1993; Gray & Watson, 2002; Judge *et al.*, 1995; Judge *et al.*, 1999; Mount & Barrick, 1995). Extraversion is the tendency to be sociable, assertive and active and to experience positive affects, such as energy and zeal.

Although personality traits have a large genetic component, they can still be trained and developed. If clinicians, trainers and educators can aggressively develop a

proactive, conscientious and extravert style of coping in individuals, this will not only help them to perform better under traditionally stressful situations, it will also correlate highly with career success and satisfaction. Therefore, career development should focus on goal-setting and formulation of strategies for the achievement of those goals. Also, possible roadblocks and potentially stressful situations should be anticipated and 'pre-disaster' plans should be in place to preempt any major negative situations, as well as techniques, strategies and resources to deal with 'disasters' if they cannot be avoided. These techniques will allow workers to prevent and, if prevention is impossible, to proactively cope with traditionally stressful situations.

The potential benefit of proactive coping techniques is that they are not preceded by negative appraisals. In proactive coping, people have a vision. They see risks, demands and opportunities in the future, but they do not appraise them as a threatening, harmful or negative. Rather, they perceive demanding situations as personal challenges and avenues to succeed. Strategies of coping become a form of goal management and attainment, instead of risk management. The proactive individual at work strives for career improvement and builds up resources that assure progress and quality of performance.

The importance of accumulating resources cannot be overstated. This is the number one method to proactively cope with difficult situations. This accumulation of resources in the workplace could refer to extra education, training, skills, techniques or human capital. In both animals and humans there has been a consistent finding that uncertainty, lack of information and the loss of control produces stress (Ursin & Olf, 1993). By providing these resources ahead of time it should better prepare

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Is communication the number one tool in dealing with potential stressful situations in the workplace?

What are the best proactive coping strategies that should be employed in corporate situations?

Is coping dependent on company position?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute (members only) via www.psychforum.org.uk.



individuals for the challenges and potential stressful situations that are common in the workplace.

Conclusions

Coping is a multifaceted response that involved numerous factors including social, environmental, personal, habitual and learned responses. From the literature it appears that we employ problem-, emotional- or avoidance-focused coping strategies when dealing with a stressful or difficult event (see Figure 1). However,

perhaps proactive coping – how we perceive and react to situations on the horizon – is the important aspect that is only just starting to receive the attention it deserves from psychologists.

Motivation issues will play a role in the method of coping, and this is an area that needs exploration. Do successful people respond to adverse conditions in a different manner than less successful people? The purpose of this article was to take a step forward in the analysis of coping strategies; however, even with the best intentions, the measurement of coping is probably as much art as it is science (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Therefore, dealing with stress in the workplace will require psychologists and corporate consultants to devise coping strategies based on the techniques outlined in this article and implement them appropriately according to the type of organisation.

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