

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PSYCHOLOGY

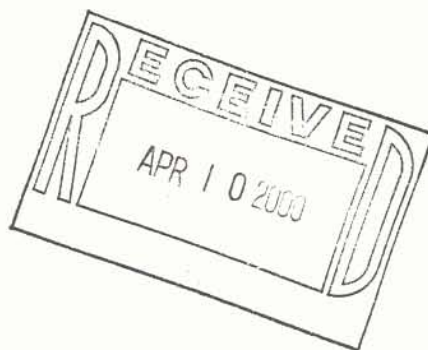
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Paul A. M. Van Lange

**COPD.** See Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease.

**COPING.** It is difficult to talk about coping, or even define it, without also talking briefly about stress. Definitions of stress typically incorporate some variation on the idea that stress involves trying to meet demands from the environment that approach or exceed the person's ability to respond effectively (either due to limitations in the person's capacity or because the person's resources have been depleted). The concept of coping refers to the various ways in which people respond when confronting this situation. In general, these responses represent either further attempts to meet the demands of the situation or attempts to deal with the negative emotions that can be created by the situation. Some kinds of responses that are examined under the label *coping*, however, represent attempts to escape, in one fashion or another, from having to deal with the situation's demands.

Interest in stress and coping has had several different focuses over the years. Some people have been most interested in the psychological processes that are involved in the experience of stress and choice of coping response. People who have this focus of interest are usually concerned with issues bearing on either emotional reactions or task performances. For example, what sorts of coping responses can minimize the negative feelings that often arise when people are under stress? What variables influence the quality of people's task performances under conditions of stress? Can certain coping responses reduce the adverse effects of

stress, or serve as a buffer against stress? Might certain coping responses actually make matters worse?

The interest of others has been captured by the fact that the psychological processes of stress and coping have physiological concomitants. The physiological reactions are believed to play a role in the development and progression of several sorts of illnesses and failures of the body. Accordingly, many people have become interested in questions about how the body reacts to stress, the pathways by which these physical reactions come to influence the development of physical disorder, and how the adverse physical reactions can be diminished or prevented. [See Stress, article on Definition and Physiology.]

### Theory

Although several theories of coping have been proposed, the one that is employed most widely by people who study stress and coping is that proposed by Lazarus (1966) and elaborated upon by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The theory is sometimes termed a *cognitive-appraisal* model and sometimes a *transactional model*.

**Coping as a Transaction.** This theory holds that the experience of psychological stress consists of the occurrence of three processes, two of which are cognitive-appraisal processes. *Primary appraisal* is the process of perceiving a threat in the environment; *secondary appraisal* is the process of deciding how to respond to the threat; *coping* is the process of executing whatever responses have been selected during secondary appraisal.

As noted, this analysis of the stress experience is also termed a *transactional model*. This term reflects the idea that the experience of stress represents a transaction between the person and the situation—it depends on both of them, rather than on just one or the other. There are at least two respects in which this is true. First, the perception of threat depends partly on the situation that the person encounters, and partly on what the person brings to the situation. For example, the sight of a spider may pose no threat to one person, but the same sight may create a severe threat to another person. This is one point at which the Lazarus model of stress intersects with the broad domain of social cognition. That is, how a given person organizes and mentally represents knowledge about the world can be expected to influence the outcomes of the person's threat appraisals.

There is also a transactional quality to the secondary appraisal process. People do not always respond reflexively and automatically to the situations they confront (or even the situations they construe). Rather, secondary appraisal often involves weighing options and considering the consequences of responding in various ways, before deciding what to do. As is true of

primary appraisal, these evaluation and decision-making processes involve information from the person's memory as well as information from the situation. As a result, the outcome of the secondary appraisal process also can be expected to differ from person to person, even if people view the threat itself in the same way.

#### **Elaborations and Further Considerations.**

Three further elaborations on this model should be noted before continuing: First, although these processes form a logical or conceptual sequence, they should not be assumed to operate in a strictly sequential way; rather, the outcome of one process may reinvoke a preceding one. For example, realizing that an adequate coping response is readily available may cause the person to reappraise the situation as less threatening. As another example, if the use of a coping response turns out to be less effective than was expected, the person may reappraise the level of threat or reappraise what coping reaction is most appropriate to the situation.

A second elaboration stems from the fact that the preceding description was presented entirely in terms of threat appraisal. The theory actually holds that three kinds of events can give rise to stress. *Threat* appraisal occurs when a person anticipates the possibility that something harmful or unpleasant will occur. *Loss* appraisal occurs when a harmful or unpleasant outcome occurs and cannot be undone. Examples of loss appraisal include such events as bereavement, the ending of a relationship, or returning home to find one's house burned to the ground.

In contrast to these wholly negative appraisals, *challenge* appraisal occurs when the person anticipates the possibility of acquiring a good or desirable outcome, but also anticipates that doing so will not be easy. Many of the stressful situations in life involve combinations of threat and challenge. An obvious example is the experience of preparing for and taking an examination. This situation incorporates the possibility of an unpleasant outcome (a poor score), but it also holds out the possibility of a positive outcome (a good score). Challenge appraisals appear to mobilize effort in the same manner as threat appraisals, but they do not cause negative feelings. Thus, some have questioned whether events involving only challenge truly represent stress in the same sense as events involving threat.

A final point to make here is that coping occurs under circumstances that vary greatly in duration, and they vary in the extent to which they have distinct phases. Some stressful encounters take only a few seconds (e.g., having blood drawn), others play themselves out over minutes or hours (e.g., having an auto accident or coming home to find your house burglarized, and dealing with the aftermath). Some encounters develop over more extended periods (e.g., the diagnosis of and treatment for a serious illness may take weeks or

months). Sometimes acute events such as these occur with some forewarning (e.g., radio accounts of an oncoming line of severe storm clouds; the listing of the final exam date in a course syllabus; several weeks of pain before you finally make an appointment for a medical examination). Sometimes there is no warning (as in the discovery of a burglary). This difference also changes the nature of the transaction.

Even relatively brief encounters can have reverberations across time. For example, having your home ransacked by a burglar can create an emotional reaction that is long-lasting, though the event itself (discovery of the intrusion, calling the police, creating a list for the insurance company) may be relatively brief. Some kinds of stressful circumstances have reverberations that are even longer lasting. Acute stressors (in which there is a relatively circumscribed event) are different in important ways from chronic stressors, in which the circumstance that creates the threat or loss is in place for an extended period of time. For example, having a chronic illness or chronic pain—and having had it for the past three years—is a stressful experience that is very different from having a car accident.

When the event has an anticipatory phase, a crisis phase, and an aftermath phase, people's coping responses can be expected to vary as a function of the phase currently being experienced. This principle also suggests that coping with an acute stressor (in which phases are more distinct) may differ in important ways from coping that occurs in response to a chronic stressor (in which phases are more blurred together).

#### **Ways of Coping**

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that the concepts of stress and coping can be applied to a broad range of situations. It should also be clear that the stressful situations that people experience differ from one another in several ways. For example, in some stressful situations the person can do a great deal to change the situation for the better. This is often the case in situations where threat is mixed with challenge. In such situations—and in many other situations in which only threat is present—the person can mobilize efforts to do something about the situation being confronted. In other situations there is little the person can do but endure the stressful experience. This is more likely to be the case when the stress derives from a loss experience than when it derives from threat or challenge.

**Problem-Focused and Emotion-Focused Coping.** Not only do situations vary in several important ways, but so do the coping responses that the situations elicit from people. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) distinguished between two broad classes of coping reactions. What they called *problem-focused coping* is any response that is aimed at doing something to alter the source of

the stress—removing, defusing, or avoiding the threatening event or altering its impact on the person. *Emotion-focused coping* is any response aimed at reducing or managing the negative feelings that arise in response to the threat or loss.

Although these two categories are easy to distinguish from each other in principle, both typically occur to some degree during every stressful transaction. Indeed, the effects of these two classes of coping can be difficult to disentangle. Emotion-focused coping removes some of the distress that can interfere with problem-focused efforts and can thereby make problem-focused coping easier. Similarly, problem-focused coping can render a threat less forbidding, thereby diminishing emotional distress. Moreover, certain kinds of coping reactions have both problem- and emotion-focused aspects. For example, people can make use of their social support resources both for advice and instrumental aid (problem focused) and for reassurance and comfort (emotion focused).

There is a certain parallelism between these two classes of coping reactions and the two classes of stressful situations that were described just beforehand. Although the match is far from perfect, it has often been noted that the balance between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping reactions tends to be influenced by the kind of situation the person is confronting. When the situation is one in which something can be done to change it, problem-focused coping tends to predominate. When the situation is one that must simply be endured, emotion-focused coping tends to predominate.

The distinction between problem- and emotion-focused coping is an important one. By itself, however, it does not go far enough to distinguish among meaningful classes of coping. For example, coping reactions that are in principle emotion focused are extremely varied. They range from the use of social support to positive reframing of the situation, to daydreaming, to wishful thinking and escapist fantasy, to making jokes about the stressful event, to heightened religious activity, to alcohol and drug use, and well beyond. It is important to recognize that such diverse types of coping may also differ in the effects they have. One important goal of research is to examine these coping reactions separately, to determine what their distinct effects are.

**Avoidance Coping.** Studies that have examined these coping reactions separately have found that not all of these responses are effective in diminishing negative feelings. In fact, there is considerable evidence that some kinds of coping responses actually make things worse. Some of the responses that seem to have this adverse effect have been termed *avoidance coping*. Such reactions include wishful thinking, escapist fantasy, denial, turning to alcohol, and overeating. Another response that seems to intensify distress is self-

blame. The idea that some kinds of coping reactions are dysfunctional rather than helpful is an important one. Although most people probably think of coping as responses that are somehow effective in dealing with a problem, research on the effects of coping provides just as much evidence—and indeed maybe even more evidence—that certain kinds of coping responses can work against the person.

### Research Issues

How do researchers determine what effects are caused by the various aspects of coping? Determining the effects of coping is somewhat more difficult than most people may realize. The research challenges are perhaps greater in this area of study than in many other areas of psychology. Several different types of research have been conducted, but none of them is completely without problems.

There is a very large set of studies in which subjects report two things at the same time: the ways in which they are currently coping with some stressor, and their current distress levels. (Some of these studies ask people to think back and report on a stressor from the recent past.) These studies typically find that avoidance coping is related to higher distress, and they sometimes find that other aspects of coping are related to lower distress. The problem with these studies is that it is impossible to tell from them whether the coping reaction is influencing the emotional distress, or whether the emotional distress is influencing the manner in which people cope. This problem always exists when the researcher measures the coping and the emotions at the same time point.

**Prospective Research Designs.** The best way to get around this problem (and the best kind of research design for studying naturally occurring coping) requires measuring coping reactions and emotions at more than one point during the period of stress (i.e., "prospective" design). That way, coping at Time 1 can be used as a predictor of emotions at the later time point, while controlling statistically for the emotions that were reported at Time 1. In the same way, emotions at Time 1 can be used to predict coping at Time 2, controlling for coping at Time 1. This is one way to disentangle which came first, the emotional responses or the coping.

This prospective design often has a problem of its own, though. Sometimes the situation changes enough between the two time points that the person's emotional responses at Time 2 are more likely to reflect the change in situation than to reflect the effects of coping. This is especially likely when the person is coping with a crisis of some sort, in which there is an anticipatory period, an event period, and a subsequent period of adjustment. Shifts in the psychological meaning of the situation from one phase to another can be dramatic

and the person's feelings can also shift greatly from one phase to another. When the situation changes a lot between assessments, it can be hard to be sure that the influence of the coping responses on emotions has received a fair test.

Another problem in coping research is that most studies examine how people cope naturally with whatever stressor is under investigation. That is, subjects in these studies decide for themselves how to cope. Only rarely are coping responses experimentally manipulated. As a result, most of the research on coping examines individual differences in coping and how these individual differences relate to emotional well-being (or to some other outcome). This creates the same problem as is always encountered in individual differences research: It is very hard to determine whether the coping response produced the effect in the study or whether the effect was caused by some other variable that also differed between persons and was not being directly examined. This is a limitation that is inherent in all correlational research, although this point is often ignored in discussions of the effects of coping.

**Personality and Coping.** It was noted earlier that coping reactions can be expected to vary from one stage to another during a stressful encounter. This variation reflects the situational aspect of coping: engaging the coping response that matches the opportunities afforded by the current phase of the encounter. (As an example, most students engage the studying response before the exam rather than right after it.) However, there is also some basis for suggesting that people have more general coping "styles" that they tend to apply to most stressful situations. This doesn't mean that their coping isn't variable across phases, only that some people have a stronger tendency toward using certain responses than other people do.

Several theorists have suggested, for example, that people vary in their general tendencies to be vigilant toward stressors. Some people are intolerant of ambiguity or uncertainty, and try to resolve ambiguities in the situations they experience as quickly as possible. These people are especially vigilant to information implying threat, whereas others are less so. These two types of people thus can be expected to function differently in any threatening situation. Another variable often discussed in conjunction with this one is the person's tolerance of emotional arousal. People who have trouble with high arousal states will be inclined to cognitive avoidance when the situation contains cues implying threat.

Another approach to individual differences in coping styles rests on assumptions about the impact of confidence and doubt on people's coping. That is, people who are confident are more likely to engage in coping efforts designed to keep them in pursuit of their goals at any given phase of a transaction than people who

are doubtful. This approach also links the notion of coping style more explicitly to an aspect of personality—optimism versus pessimism. [See *Optimism and Pessimism*.] There is considerable evidence that people who are relatively optimistic tend to cope in different ways than people who are more pessimistic, even at the same stage of a particular transaction. Again, this does not mean that either kind of person is insensitive to changes in situation, but simply that one is more likely to engage in certain types of coping than the other, irrespective of those changes.

**Assessment of Coping.** In most research on the subject, coping reactions are assessed by self-report, using one of the many measures that have been published over the past 20 years. Since many of the coping reactions that researchers are interested in are intrapsychic, some of the information gained by these self-reports cannot be obtained in any other way. However, the use of self-report rating scales raises a host of issues. For one thing, ratings are often made retrospectively, even if the study itself is prospective. That is, sometimes people are asked to indicate how they have been coping with a particular problem "over the past week." This requires the person to mentally integrate information over a substantial period of time, raising the question of how well anyone can be expected to do at this task.

Another issue that is raised concerns the nature of the response choices. Often the options are very vague, requiring a judgment on the part of the respondent about the meaning of a response choice. What does it mean to say that you used a particular coping response "a lot" during the past week? Different people have different understandings of these response choices, and this creates a problem in interpretation.

An alternative procedure makes use of paging systems that ask the person to indicate what coping responses he or she is engaged in at that moment. This has the advantage of not requiring respondents to reflect on more than a few moments in time. It has the disadvantage of possibly forcing the person to make a rating at an inopportune time. Another alternative that is less demanding but still requires some retrospection is to assess people at the end of each day regarding that day. It should be apparent that either of these alternative procedures will generate considerably more data than would a procedure that assessed once a week or once a month. The additional complexity of the data required additional complexity in the data analysis. Nonetheless, this approach seems to be more likely to be followed in the future.

### **Conceptions of Coping: Final Issues**

Although the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) model of stress and coping has had more influence on people's work in this area than any alternative model, ideas

have also been advanced by others. For example, Hobfoll (1989) proposed a view of stress that relies on a principle he calls "conservation of resources." He assumes that people strive to build, retain, and protect resources of various types, and that the potential or actual loss of those resources is threatening and stress-inducing. Resources, in this view, are anything the individual values. Resources may be objects (e.g., house, car), conditions (e.g., status, seniority), energies (e.g., time, knowledge), or personal characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, optimism). People try to hold onto their resources, and when confronting threat their goal is to minimize resource loss. One implication of this view is that actual or potential loss lies at the heart of all stress.

**Coping as Self-Regulation Under Adversity.** The Lazarus and Folkman (1984) model of coping was initially proposed as a way of thinking about stress and coping per se (as is also true of Hobfoll's 1989 model). Discussions of this topic typically begin with these two concepts—stress and coping—as the point of departure. In so doing, they sometimes make the topic sound as though it stands separate from the rest of psychology. Stress can seem to be an exotic event that occurs only under special circumstances; coping can seem to be a special class of actions that differs in important ways from other actions. Such a picture would be misleading, however. Stress is part of almost everyone's everyday life, and coping is in many ways no different from any other behavior.

I have argued elsewhere that the elements of experience and behavior that are emphasized in models of stress and coping are more or less the same as those that are assumed in broader self-regulatory models of behavior-in-general. Today's models of behavior-in-general tend to rely on the assumption that behavior is goal directed. They also tend to assume that people have somewhat idiosyncratic construals of the world and of the consequences of their behavior. Finally, such models typically assume that behavior varies from person to person when obstacles interfere with attainment of (or even progress toward) desired goals. In particular, people who are confident of eventual success continue, or even amplify, their task-directed efforts. Those who are more doubtful do a variety of things that reflect an avoidance of continued effort toward the goal. Sometimes those who are more doubtful even give up the goal. Giving up is often painful and difficult, however, and it sometimes takes a long time to occur.

A comparison with the theoretical description that came earlier in this entry will reveal that the conceptual elements in the preceding paragraph are very similar to the elements in the Lazarus and Folkman model of stress. The resemblance is increased by adding some brief elaboration on the meaning of threat and loss: In

this view, threat occurs when the attainability of some desired goal (or the avoidability of some undesired state) is interfered with. Loss occurs when the attainability (or avoidability) has been preempted altogether.

People sometimes respond to threats with renewed effort at goal attainment, they sometimes respond by trying to relax and reduce their distress, and they sometimes respond by giving up or by engaging in avoidance coping. Avoidance coping does not help the individual figure out how to move toward a goal, however, and it may actually interfere with such movement. For that reason it ultimately can have adverse rather than positive effects. When viewed from this angle, then, coping is simply a special label for what people do every time they encounter obstacles in life, whether temporary or permanent.

[See also Defense Mechanisms.]

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