

Coping with Job Stress

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Abstract

The psychological process of dealing with job stressors in order to reduce strain or negative health effects is called coping. More specially, coping with job stress refers to mental and behavioral strategies of employees to handle the stressors they encounter at work. Coping with job stress involves the dynamic interplay of the employee and his or her job environment or work setting that is appraised as stressful in terms of harm, threat, or loss. More recent conceptualizations of coping broaden the concept by emphasizing its proactive nature, that is, the mastery of positively appraised challenging demands.

Coping with job stress is a key concept in understanding people's adaptation to their work roles. At work, employees are confronted with various kinds of demands, which may become 'stressors' when they tax or exceed the employee's adaptive capabilities. Examples of common job stressors include work overload, role problems, poor job control, lack of support from supervisors and coworkers, and interpersonal conflicts. These stressors may lead to negative psychological (e.g., depression, irritability, and burnout), physical (e.g., headaches, heart palpitations, and hyperventilation), and behavioral (e.g., absenteeism, turnover, and violence) symptoms or 'strains.' The psychological process that is involved in dealing with these job stressors in order to reduce strain is called 'coping.' More specially, coping with job stress refers to the mental and behavioral strategies that employees use to handle the stressors they encounter at work.

The Concept of Coping

Rather than a homogeneous concept, coping represents a diffuse umbrella term. Nevertheless, a widely used definition of coping exists that refers to the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts a person makes to manage demands that tax or exceed his or her personal resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping refers to a dynamic interplay between person and environment that occurs when an individual appraises a situation or an event as stressful. Applied to the work situation, this interplay involves the employee and the work setting that is appraised as stressful. It is important to note that coping refers merely to the effort made and not to the quality of the outcome. That means that coping may be either effective or successful in preventing, avoiding, or controlling individual distress or it may be ineffective or unsuccessful. For instance, compensatory or comfort behaviors such as excessive eating, smoking, drinking, or working commonly are maladaptive coping strategies. Furthermore, coping may refer to overt actions or observable behaviors as well as to covert, unobservable thoughts and events, and it may occur as a response to an event or in anticipation of upcoming demands.

The Historical Development of Coping

Initially, coping was studied from a psychodynamic point of view in the context of general human adaptation. In the first

half of the twentieth century, leading psychoanalysts like Freud, Adler, and Jung described adjustment and defense mechanisms by which individuals were supposed to deal with intrapsychic conflict. Building upon this earlier work, in the 1960s and 1970s, ego psychologists distinguished between 'coping' as an advanced or mature ego process leading to successful adaptation and 'defense' as an unsuccessful neurotic mode of adaptation.

The second approach emerged from the 1960s and conceived coping in terms of personality traits. Relatively stable dispositions or coping styles (i.e., denial, repression, and vigilance) were expected to determine the individual's coping behavior across various situations. Although empirical research has shown that people possess stable and consistent coping preferences, it is likewise true that individuals are able to vary their responses to stressful situations in accordance with situational constraints and possibilities. Personality traits have made a comeback in the 1970s and 1980s as so-called personal coping resources like 'hardiness,' 'dispositional optimism,' 'self-efficacy,' and 'sense of coherence.' Such coping resources were expected to foster successful coping since the individual can draw upon them when under stress.

The currently dominant transactional approach originates from the work that Lazarus and his colleagues have performed since the 1950s. In contrast to the psychoanalytic approach, coping is defined in this approach by an effort that is independent from its success and includes proactive as well as defensive strategies. Furthermore, coping is considered to be a dynamic and transactional process involving person and environment rather than a personality disposition.

Following the emergence of positive psychology, the concept of coping has been broadened since the turn of the century and includes self-regulated goal attainment strategies and personal growth as well. In other words, coping is expanded beyond dealing with adverse events and extends to mastering challenges.

Coping has been applied to various aspects of human life. Initially, it was used predominantly in clinical and health psychology to understand how patients deal with chronic disease, substance use, loss, chronic pain, and trauma. Also, minor coping efforts involving so-called daily hassles have been identified and investigated. Coping with job stress (including unemployment) has been studied since the end of the 1970s and involves long-term chronic job stressors (e.g., future job insecurity), short-term daily hassles at the job

(e.g., interpersonal conflict), as well as acute severe stressors (e.g., armed robbery). Most recently, ambitious goal setting and tenacious goal pursuit (e.g., learning new job skills) have been studied by way of 'positive coping,' which promotes personal growth and development (Schwarzer and Knoll, 2003).

General Coping Theory

The leading cognitive-behavioral theory of stress and coping of Richard Lazarus and his coworkers (*see* Stress, Coping, and Health) may be applied to work situations as well. It assumes that a particular situation or event is appraised negatively as being stressful in terms of threat, loss, or harm. Alternatively, the situation or event may also be appraised neutral or positive as a challenge. This so-called primary appraisal refers to the extent to which something is at stake for the person. For instance, a conflict with a colleague may threaten the employee's self-esteem, whereas unemployment is likely to be perceived as a loss of status and income. 'Secondary appraisal' refers to options the person has to cope with the harm, threat, or loss. These depend on personal characteristics, such as motivation, beliefs about oneself and the world, as well as on resources for coping such as financial means, social and problem-solving skills, particular personality traits, and a favorable work situation with social support from one's colleagues and supervisors. It is important to note that both appraisal processes, primary (demand) appraisal and secondary (resource) appraisal, are two components of one cognitive process that takes place simultaneously instead of successively.

Generally speaking, a main distinction is made between two targets: (1) instrumental, problem-focused coping, which involves attempts to deal with stress by directly altering the situation and (2) palliative, emotion-focused coping, which involves attempts to regulate the emotional responses to a stressful situation. For instance, employees might consult their supervisors after a conflict with a colleague (problem focused) or they may try to relax or divert themselves (emotion focused). In addition, various methods of coping are distinguished such as active cognitive (i.e., intrapsychic attempts to manage the appraisal of the stressor through, for instance, constructive dialogue or positive comparison), active behavioral (i.e., overt attempts to deal directly with the stressor), and

avoidance (i.e., avoiding or denying the stressor). Although targets and methods of coping can be distinguished theoretically, this distinction is usually quite difficult to make at the practical level.

After the coping effort has been completed, 'reappraisal' of the initial stressful event takes place along the same lines as the original primary appraisal. The conflict with one's colleague may be solved or one may have found a new job. In that case, the reappraisal is positive and there is no need for further coping efforts. However, in case initial coping efforts failed and the event is reappraised as stressful, coping attempts continue.

Originally, Lazarus' stress and coping theory was neither applied to future demands nor to positive, challenging demands. Recently, anticipatory coping has been defined as an effort to deal with pending harm, threat, or loss; the person faces a negative event that is fairly certain to occur in the near future. In a somewhat similar vein, preventive coping is an effort to prepare for uncertain events in the longer run by building up the necessary resources. Such future-directed coping efforts seem to be particularly relevant in today's continuously changing world of work. Finally, proactive coping reflects efforts to build up general resources that facilitate promotion toward challenging goals and personal growth. Rather than by negative appraisals, proactive coping is sparked by positive challenges.

The Individual and Organizational Perspective

In Table 1, a taxonomy of individual ways of coping with job stress is displayed, including some examples of coping behaviors. Typically, in occupational settings, workplace strain and coping are individual as well as organizational issues. This means that interventions to reduce workplace strain may be targeted at the individual and/or the organizational level (Quick et al., 1997).

Interventions that focus on the individual include job stress education activities, relaxation, cognitive-behavioral programs, and employee skills training in such areas as time management and assertiveness. Interventions that focus on the organization seek to reduce strain by changing or improving the work setting (e.g., job redesign, selection and training policies, and organizational development). Although organization-based interventions offer considerable potential for reducing or eliminating

Table 1 Ways of coping with job stress

Method	Cognitive	Problem/task	Emotions/reactions
		Control (e.g., planning, organizing, and prioritizing work assignments)	Control (e.g., try to think of oneself as a winner, as someone who always comes through)
		Escape (e.g., try to pay attention only to your duties in order to overlook difficulties)	Escape (e.g., to tell oneself that difficulties are unimportant)
	Behavioral	Social (e.g., sit down with somebody and talk things over)	Social (e.g., to express one's irritation to other colleagues or to let off steam)
		Solitary (e.g., to do what has to be done, one step at a time)	Solitary (e.g., spend time on a hobby)
		Control (e.g., delay or leave some of one's normal job responsibilities)	Control (e.g., show no emotional reaction and do not communicate distress to anyone)
		Escape (e.g., get busy with other things to keep one's mind off the problem)	Escape (e.g., change to nonwork activities, take pills, smoke more)

Adapted from Latack, L.C., Havlicov, S.J., 1992. Coping with job stress: a conceptual evaluation framework for coping measures. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 13, 497-508.

job stressors, most workplace initiatives focus on the individual employee. That is, these interventions improve the employee's resilience by changing their maladaptive beliefs, improving their lifestyle, exercising stress management skills, and augmenting coping resources. Different individual programs are available including onsite fitness facilities, health screening, dietary control, smoking cessation, cardiovascular fitness programs, relaxation classes, stress management training, anti-burnout workshops, stress and health education, and psychological counseling. Although these activities are aimed at the individual, this does not exclude collective coping efforts (Pieró, 2008). Collective coping occurs when a group (work team, department) faces a common perceived threat or noxious situation that collectively initiates actions, for instance, by preventing, eliminating, or reducing the stressful situation, by positively reinterpreting the situation, or by alleviating its negative consequences.

Research

Earlier studies on coping with job stress often found that employees use fewer problem-focused than emotion-focused strategies directed at changing the problems encountered in the context of work. This was interpreted by noting that the very nature of problems at work is perhaps not ameliorated easily by attempts to change them. It was reasoned that employees are perhaps better off by developing a renewed cognitive perspective and by regulating their negative emotions. More recent studies, however, point to the opposite; currently employees seem to favor problem-focused coping instead of emotion-focused coping. More detailed investigations have shown that the level of job control plays a crucial role. When a high level of job control exists, problem-focused strategies prevail, but when job control is poor employees seem to favor emotion-focused strategies. Unfortunately, the latter are generally less effective compared to the former. For instance, studies on organizational changes, such as corporate restructuring and downsizing, suggest that employees cope rather poorly with these events, which are largely beyond their control. They use predominantly emotion-focused and avoidant coping strategies and suffer long-term adverse mental health.

As a general rule, a more active, problem-focused, and control-oriented coping strategy goes along with less (mental) health symptoms and higher employee well-being. In contrast, emotion-focused strategies as well as escape-oriented or avoidant strategies are usually associated with poor (mental) health and reduced well-being. However, two factors seem to be important for successful coping: time frame and availability of coping resources. It seems that emotion-focused or escape-avoidant-oriented strategies are effective when dealing with short-term stressors, whereas problem-focused and control-oriented strategies are more effective when dealing with chronic or recurrent job stressors. Furthermore, employees who have more coping resources at their disposal appear to use more active coping efforts and less avoidant coping. Consequently, employees who can draw upon coping resources are more likely to deal successfully with job stress.

Generally speaking, individual-based interventions, particularly relaxation programs and cognitive-behavioral programs

(e.g., rational emotive behavior education), seem to be effective in reducing employee strain (i.e., burnout, distress, depressed mood, anxiety, and psychosomatic symptoms), whereas the effectiveness of organization-based strategies is still to be demonstrated in a convincing way.

As far as the relationship between employee coping and sociobiographical factors (e.g., age, gender, and education) and job factors (e.g., level and type of job) is concerned, no conclusive empirical evidence is available (Dewe et al., 2010). For instance, among employees no consistent gender-specific or job-specific coping patterns have been observed. Most likely, this lack of conclusive evidence has to be attributed to the complex interaction patterns that exist among the factors involved and the idiosyncratic nature of coping with job stress.

Methodological Issues and Future Directions for Research

The measurement of coping is fraught with problems that are partly due to the fact that almost exclusively self-report questionnaires are used. More specifically, empirically developed coping scales yield dimensions or coping behaviors that differ from theory-based coping scales. Furthermore, the number of coping dimensions included in various questionnaires varies (e.g., from 2 to 28), and there is no agreement either on the hierarchy of these dimensions or on the fact whether coping should be assessed as dispositional (trait) or situational (state) characteristic. Although various measures exist to assess coping with job stress, there is no 'gold standard.' Given the complexity and the idiosyncrasy of coping, a standard way of assessing it is unlikely to be ever achieved. The future research challenge is to expand coping with job stress beyond its traditional meaning of an individual reaction to adversity by exploring how employees come to grapple with (1) future job demands (anticipatory and preventive coping), (2) positive challenges (proactive coping), and (3) common job stressors (collective coping).

See also: Control Beliefs; Health Perspectives; Occupational Health; Resilience; Self-Efficacy and Health; Stress at Work.

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