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**THE PROCESS OF COPING:
AN ALTERNATIVE EXAMINATION**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy
in Psychology at
Massey University

Helen Marguerite Foster

1995

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ABSTRACT

The area of research into coping is complex and challenging and there are no agreed methods to examine the facets of coping behaviour. The present research aimed to capture the complexity of the experience of coping as a multi-faceted, dynamic, flowing phenomenon, and to explore the way people experience the changes that occur over time as a stressful event evolves. Coping was conceptualised as a process which is initiated when a person first becomes aware that she or he is under stress and continues to flow and change until there is an indication that an outcome has been reached. The theoretical framework was based on the transactional perspective of Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and included the concepts of appraisal, coping strategies, reactions and outcome. An alternative methodology was used which corresponded to the theoretical framework and attempted to capture how people coped with stressful events individually and collectively. The analyses provided a finer-grained examination of the entire coping process. Two studies were conducted to examine the coping process over time. In the first study, ten participants reported their experiences of coping with short-term stress in daily stressful events. In the second study, nine women reported their experience of coping with the longer term event of gynaecological surgery. They reported their experiences of coping at five phases: prior to the surgery; during hospitalisation; at two stages of the recovery phase; and following the medical clearance.

The results from the first study showed that there was considerable variability in how the participants coped with daily events. In the surgery study it was found that those who had a positive subjective outcome experienced coping as a process differently to those who had a negative subjective outcome. The results from both studies showed that specific patterns of responses between the appraisals, coping strategies, and reactions flowed reciprocally and influenced the outcome. It was found that some patterns were variable. These were considered to be the continual attempts to manage the stressful event, and the effectiveness of these attempts depended on whether the coping process was positive or negative. Other patterns of response appeared to be consistent and these were established in the initial stages. They tended to be maintained over time and were considered to be the main influence in the outcome. When the coping process was generally appraised as positive, then there was a positive outcome. When the coping process was appraised as negative, there were positive attempts at coping but these were outweighed by the negative influences and there was usually a negative outcome. It was concluded that the process of coping is a continually flowing experience which is influenced mainly by cognitive appraisals which are established during the initial stages of a stressful event. It is the specific combinations of appraisals, coping strategies and

reactions which constitute the coping process and influence the outcome. The complexity of the experience of coping and specific patterns of responses can be captured in more detail by the use of an alternative methodology which gathers more detailed information and analyses the data at an individual level as well as at the group level. There were limitations to the methodology used and these are discussed, as are future directions for research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my supervisors, Kerry Chamberlain and Dr John Spicer, for seven years of guidance and patience. Together we found a way to overcome the complexities and the challenges of the research and I appreciate their contribution, feedback and support. My thanks also to Dr Keith Tuffin for his encouragement and suggestions during his year as temporary second supervisor .

Thank you to my son Brent, who was always there to help me with any computer problems. Also to Gayle Leader for her help with formatting some of the final versions of the tables and diagrams. Thank you to Bruce Rapley for completing the final versions of the graphs, and for his ongoing support and help with some of the practical problems in the final stages.

My grateful thanks to the participants of both studies for their commitment to the research. Thank you also to the gynaecologist, the two receptionists and others who helped recruit the participants.

Finally, thank you to my family, friends and colleagues who helped sustain my interest through their encouragement and support. Special thanks to Karen Wood who shared mutual experiences so often.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

OVERVIEW	1
CHAPTER	
ONE: THE CONCEPT OF COPING	3
Theories of coping	4
Historical perspectives	4
Transactional models	5
Adaptation and effectiveness of coping	7
Coping as a process	9
Process and outcome	10
Temporal Factors.....	13
Summary	14
TWO: AN EXTENDED MODEL OF COPING.....	16
Coping strategies	16
Appraisal	18
Primary Appraisal.....	19
Harm/loss, threat and challenge.	19
Secondary Appraisal.....	21
Repertoire	23
History	24
Constraints.....	25
Awareness	26
Summary	26
A reconceptualisation of secondary appraisal	27
Tertiary Appraisal.....	28
Reappraisal	29
Control.....	30
Outcome	32
Reactions	33
Summary	35
THREE: MEASUREMENT OF COPING.....	38
Coping strategies	38
Appraisal	42
Primary appraisal.....	42
Secondary appraisal.....	43
Tertiary appraisal.....	43
Methodological issues	45

An alternative framework.....	48
FOUR: DAILY EVENTS STUDY	
Aims and method.....	51
Daily stressful events.....	51
Method.....	52
Participants	52
Measures.....	52
The Daily Record	52
Procedure.....	56
Ethical Considerations.....	57
Data analysis.....	58
FIVE: DAILY EVENTS STUDY	
Results	62
Classification of events	64
Distinct events	68
Organisational events	70
Indefinite events	72
Ongoing events.....	74
Comparison of the types of events	76
Summary	77
Outcome and the coping process.....	78
Resolution events	81
Partial resolution events	83
No resolution events.....	84
Comparison of the outcome groups.....	85
Ineffective strategies and outcome	86
Summary	89
Primary appraisal and the coping process	89
Challenge appraisal	90
Threat/challenge appraisal.....	94
Comparison of the primary appraisals.....	95
Summary	96
Conclusions	97
SIX: TRANSITION TO THE SURGERY STUDY	
Methodological considerations.....	105
The surgery study	105
Aim.....	106

Method.....	107
Participants	107
Materials	107
Procedure	110
Pilot study	111
Ethical considerations.....	112
SEVEN: DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS FOR INDIVIDUAL CONSTRUCTS.....	113
Coping strategies	114
Summary	116
Appraisal	116
Stress appraisal	117
Primary Appraisal.....	118
Threat.....	118
Harm and Loss.....	120
Summary	121
Secondary Appraisal.....	122
Repertoire	122
Constraints.....	124
Awareness	125
Summary	125
Tertiary Appraisal.....	126
Perceived effectiveness	126
Perceived ineffectiveness	128
Summary	128
Control.....	129
Summary	130
Reactions	131
Positive emotions	131
Negative emotions.....	132
Cognitive reactions.....	133
Physical reactions.....	134
Summary	134
Outcome	135
Social Functioning.....	135
Morale	136
Physical Health	136
Summary	136
Trends during each phase	137

Conclusions	137
EIGHT: TWO GROUPS WITH DIFFERENT OUTCOMES	142
Trends for individual constructs over time.....	142
Coping strategies	142
Appraisal	144
Stress	145
Primary appraisal.....	147
Secondary appraisal.....	148
Tertiary appraisal.....	149
Control.....	150
Reactions	150
Summary	154
Trends during each phase	155
Presurgery phase.....	155
Hospitalisation phase.....	159
Recuperation phase.....	160
Recovery phase.....	162
Outcome phase	163
Summary	164
Conclusions	170
NINE: CASE STUDIES	
Four views of the coping process.....	174
Case study one	174
Summary	178
Case study two.....	180
Summary	185
Case study three.....	185
Summary	192
Case study four.....	194
Summary	198
Comparison of case studies	200
Conclusions	202
TEN: DISCUSSION.....	204
Constructs of the coping process.....	207
Initial influencing factors	208
Secondary appraisal.....	209
Coping strategies	210

Tertiary appraisal	212
Primary appraisal	214
Control	215
Appraisal	217
Reactions	217
Coping as a process	218
Methodological issues	219
REFERENCES	227
APPENDIX	
A	238
B	239
C	245
D	246
E	247
F	255

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE

1	Descriptive data for the constructs in the coping process in each type of event	65
2	Mean number of each of the coping strategies used in the types of events	67
3	Descriptive data for the constructs in the coping process for the types of outcome.....	79
4	Mean number of each of the coping strategies used in each type of outcome	80
5	Descriptive data for the constructs in the coping process for the resolution and no resolution outcomes where ineffective coping strategies were perceived	87
6	Descriptive data for the constructs in the coping process for the different primary appraisals	91
7	Mean number of each of the coping strategies used in the different primary appraisals	92
8	Coping strategies used by at least six of the participants for each of the first four phases	115
9	Mean ratings, standard deviations and ranges for the perception of stress at each phase of the surgery event	117
10	Mean ratings, standard deviations and ranges for primary appraisal as rated on the visual analogue scales	119
11	Mean ratings, standard deviations and ranges for the perception of tertiary appraisal at each phase	126
12	Mean ratings, standard deviations and ranges for the perception of control at each phase	130
13	Means, standard deviations and ranges for the positive and negative emotions, and the cognitive and physical reactions over time	151
14	Mean number and type of coping strategy for the first four phases for Group P and Group N	143

FIGURE

1	Diagram showing how the reciprocal flow between the constructs if the coping process is conceptualised.....	36
2	Diagram showing the possible flow between the constructs in the coping process for the distinct events	69
3	Diagram showing the possible flow between the constructs in the coping process for the organisational events	71
4	Diagram showing the possible flow between the constructs in the coping process for the indefinite events	73
5	Diagram showing the possible flow between the constructs in the coping process for the ongoing events	75
6	Diagram showing the possible flow between the constructs in the coping process for the types of outcome.....	82
7	Diagram showing the possible causal flow between the constructs which contributed to a resolution of the problem despite ineffective strategies.....	88
8	Diagram showing the possible causal flow between the constructs that contributed to no resolution of the problem when ineffective strategies were perceived	88
9	Diagram showing the differences in the coping process between the primary appraisals	97
10	General pattern showing the constructs which contributed to a tertiary appraisal.....	139
11	General pattern showing the constructs that contributed to different outcomes	140
12	Mean ratings over time for the appraisals for the two groups.....	146
13	Mean ratings over time for the positive and negative emotions for the two groups.....	151
14	Mean ratings over time for the cognitive and physical reactions for the two groups	153
15	Summary of the coping process for the two groups during the presurgery phase	158
16	Summary of the similarities and difficulties in the coping process over time for the two groups	165

17	Diagram showing the consistent and variable constructs in the coping process for the first four phases	171
18	Ratings of appraisal over time for Mrs K	176
19	Summary of the coping process for Mrs K showing a reciprocal flow between the constructs	179
20	Ratings of appraisal over time for Mrs L.....	182
21	Summary of the coping process for Mrs L showing a reciprocal flow between the constructs.....	186
22	Ratings of appraisal over time for Mrs M.....	189
23	Summary of the coping process for Mrs M showing a reciprocal flow between the constructs	193
24	Ratings of appraisal over time for Mrs N	
25	Summary of the coping process for Mrs N showing a reciprocal flow between the constructs	199
26	Conceptualisation showing how the outcome was influenced by the reciprocal flow of the coping process.....	220

OVERVIEW

Researchers generally view coping behaviour as a mediator between stressful events and adaptational outcomes. The notion of coping is complex and the literature in the area is confusing. Over the last fifteen to twenty years there has been a change in focus from person variables as the sole determinant of coping, to a process-oriented approach. The major emphasis is now on coping as a dynamic, changing, evolving process which involves continual appraisal and reappraisal of the person-environment relationship, and use of the coping strategies which attempt to alter the negative responses to the stressful event. The most pervasive theory in current research is Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model which offers a sound basis for the coping process to be viewed as dynamic and multi-faceted. A major limitation of the model is the insistence that process and outcome be kept separate and this has led to a focus on process to the exclusion of considering the effectiveness of the coping strategies and the outcome of the event. Process and outcome are linked inevitably and it is important to determine how they influence each other. In the present research, process and outcome were both considered part of the coping process, which was defined as the changing efforts to manage stressful encounters, which are continually appraised over time until evaluation of the effectiveness of the efforts alters the stress.

There is little agreement on the measurement of coping and researchers have generally focused on developing assessments of coping strategies with little emphasis on other aspects of the process. There has continued to be a reliance on traditional quantitative research methods and this has led to knowledge of what people do to cope but there is limited knowledge as to how, when or why people cope. The present research presented an alternative methodology which provided a more detailed in-depth analysis and monitored the entire coping process.

The aim of the present research was to evaluate the coping process as a multi-faceted, flowing, changing phenomenon and to explore the changes in the coping process over time. Chapter one presents a brief review of theories, argues for including outcome as part of the coping process and discusses the need to consider temporal factors. Chapter two describes, reviews, critiques and extends Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) model, and describes the theoretical framework for the present research. Chapter three discusses the measurement of coping and argues for an alternative framework. Chapter four focuses on the method for the first study which investigated daily stressful events. Chapter five presents the results from the daily events study. Chapter six discusses the need to investigate one ongoing event and describes the aim and method of the surgery study. The next three chapters present the results of the surgery study. Chapter seven presents

the descriptive results for all participants. The results for two groups of participants who had different outcomes are presented in chapter eight. Chapter nine examines four case studies, and the conclusions from both studies and implications of the present research are discussed in chapter ten.