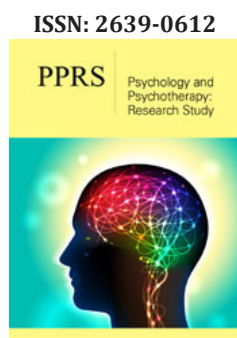


It's All About Coping

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Opinion



Language is a core element of how we think and how we feel. Moreover, it is the tool with which psychotherapists help individuals to explore, to evaluate, and to grow. This is made possible as psychologists define and operationalize key concepts to advance our understandings through empirical research and measurement. None more so than in the most highly researched fields of resilience and coping. Both coping and resilience have entered our daily vernacular, the latter particularly in the COVID years of 2020-2022 when everyone's interest was focused on how we, as individuals and collectives, deal with the challenges of our times. And the lesser known of these concepts is fortitude. The three key constructs are compared and contrasted to help us to better understand how we cope in good times and in bad and how we can move forward to achieve the best outcomes for ourselves and for our communities. All three constructs, despite their individual research histories and development are consistent with the positive psychological orientation made prominent at the turn of the century by Martin Seligman [1] and colleagues. It is about capacity building, achieving potential in the context of awareness about others, and living the good life.

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Coping is the best known and operationalized of the three constructs. Since the early 1980's when Richard Lazarus, having already led the Stress Research Laboratory at Berkeley, California for several decades, began the measurement of coping. These endeavors have led to the development of countless measurement tools for adult, adolescent and child populations around the globe, and clinical interventions followed. Historically, coping research has evolved from stress research and consistent with the positive psychology approach has reflected the movement from a deficit model of adaptation to exploring people's capacity to deal with life's circumstances and fulfil their potential rather than simply reacting to stress. Coping research deals with how individuals can enhance their quality of life through use of effective coping strategies. Thus, there was a shift in emphasis on the impact and outcome of stress to coping and how coping can mitigate the impact of stress.

In 1984, Lazarus and Folkman, in foreshadowing the theory on coping, described stress as the mismatch between the perceived demands of a situation and the individual's assessment of his or her resources to deal with these demands Lazarus and Folkman described coping as the 'constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person'. This remains the most frequently cited definition. The definition addresses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of the coping process and also focuses on the effort associated with an individual's response. Moving beyond the traditional view of coping as mastery over the environment, Lazarus and Folkman [2] broaden the process of coping to include accepting, tolerating, avoiding, or minimizing the stressors, and all purposeful attempts to manage stress regardless of their effectiveness. The key elements of this transactional theory of coping by Lazarus and Folkman [2] are the person, the environment, and the appraisal process. Coping is hence viewed as a dynamic process that changes over time as it responds to demands, following appraisals, both objective and subjective.

The Lazarus and Folkman's conceptualisation rests firmly on the concept of appraisal which may occur unconsciously at an automatic level. During primary appraisal, one assesses whether a situation is one of threat (i.e., potential future harm); harm/loss (that has occurred)

or challenges (i.e., how we can learn or gain confidence from this experience). The person then examines whether he or she has the resources (both internal and external) to cope (secondary appraisal) and followed by an evaluation of the coping strategy post coping (tertiary appraisal). Since appraisal is a critical component of the coping process it is how individuals evaluate a situation and the resources that they have to cope that is all important. The more plentiful our coping resources the more likely we are to deal with life challenges.

Whilst by 2017 resilience had overtaken coping as the more highly cited field of research [3] it is a construct most essentially reliant on coping resources. Zautra and Reich [4], postulate that resilience is recovery, sustainability, and growth from an individual or collectivist perspective, from a single biological system to a person, an organization, a neighborhood, a community, a city, a state, or even a nation. Three features of this definition relate to recovery, sustainability, and growth. They acknowledge that 'our attention to these three features of resilience is best seen through the dynamic lens of coping and adaptation' (2010, p. 175). Indeed, in that sense resilience is akin to coping.

Resilience comes from the Latin 'salire' to spring up and 'resilire' meaning to leap or spring back, hence the bounce back concept of resilience. Resilience and coping are closely linked, with resilience considered as the ability to 'bounce back' despite adversity or setbacks and that is generally achieved by having good coping resources. Coping is what demonstrates our capacity to 'bounce back' in a personal sense or as a collective of individuals. Coping can be construed as what we do - the process- and resilience can be seen as the outcome. When it comes to resilience there is tendency to focus on adversity rather than health, wellbeing and the capacity to flourish. Indeed, by amassing good coping resources to enable the individual to bounce back from adversity and by living the good life through doing good there is an increased capacity to raise one's level of wellbeing and to cope effectively

Our coping skills go into the stockpile of coping strategies to build our resilience and fortitude. It is the next level in coping research. Fortitude come from the Latin word for strength, it is the tank where you coping skills are stored. We want to keep filling it. It is about having the mental and emotional strength to face difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation courageously and perhaps think beyond the self and consider the good of others. It is about sustainability and wellbeing. Fortitude is a less familiar construct that has been associated with the age-old Finnish cultural concept of 'sisu', the ability to push through unbearable challenges. It has also been described as doggedness. Determination and motivation are at the core of both our successes and our survival. It is about the ability to surpass one's own expectations of the self and overcoming preconceived limitations by drawing on resources. It is about drawing on reserves in the moment rather than about endurance or goal setting and achievement. Sisu has been described by Emilia Lahti [5] as drawing on the 'latent energy of the human system', latent power, intestinal fortitude that has often been termed as having the guts. Thus, having drive and perspective, being resourceful and building up an armament of resources and supports should you require them, a capacity to learn from one's experiences are all embodied in how we cope.

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