

PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH PROGRESS



Managing Stress

From Theory
to Application

Tracey J. Devonport
Editor

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MANAGING STRESS

FROM THEORY TO APPLICATION

TRACEY J. DEVONPORT
EDITOR



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MANAGING STRESS
FROM THEORY TO APPLICATION

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DEDICATION

I wish to acknowledge the support of my parents Carol and Keith Devonport from whom I have learned so much. In addition I wish to acknowledge my partner Cat who is also ever supportive, considerate and kind. Finally, this book is dedicated to my son Finlay James. Finlay has given my world a whole new dimension and one I would never wish to look back from.

Much love,
Tracey

PREFACE

During the production of this book several significant events have occurred that highlight the value of coping research, particularly that which seeks to apply theory to enhance the health, well-being and performance of recipients. These events have included natural disasters (e.g., flooding, earthquakes), civil unrest (e.g., as experienced in Libya and the Ivory Coast) and a worldwide economic recession. Perhaps the worst natural disaster in recent history occurred on March 11th 2011 when an earthquake measuring 8.9 in tremor magnitude hit Japan, the fifth largest quake recorded since 1900. A resulting tsunami struck Japan reaching 10 kilometres (six miles) inland in places carrying houses, buildings, boats and cars with it. The natural disaster also removed power to the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Without power to cool nuclear fuel, steam began filling the station until a series of explosions occurred. As a result, millions of gallons of radioactive water escaped into the Pacific Ocean. Thousands of people living near the Fukushima nuclear power plant were ordered to evacuate the area. The widespread destruction and suffering experienced by cities such as Sendai were relayed on television screens around the world. More than 8,000 people died in the disaster, thousands were injured with at least 12,000 missing. Many people were forced to live in evacuation centres as 14,000 homes were destroyed and around 100,000 damaged. In the aftermath of the earthquake the sense of loss amongst the Japanese community was palpable. Communities were destroyed; individuals lost loved ones, residencies, possessions, health and livelihoods.

Existing research is invaluable when looking to expedite the process of community and individual coping following natural disasters. For example, following earthquakes experienced in New Zealand (Canterbury 4th September 2010 7.1-magnitude earthquake; Canterbury 22nd February 2001, 6.3-magnitude earthquake), the New Zealand ministry of health published a series of factsheets intended to outline common responses to natural disasters and to offer advice on personal coping and helping others, such as children, to cope with the aftermath of an earthquake (<http://www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/coping-with-stress> accessed May 7th 2011). When examining the content of these factsheets, explicit references to coping research are evidenced.

Such practices indicate that a strategy for developing coping interventions is to base them in theory and research. In doing so it is then possible to test theoretical and applied contentions refining them as appropriate thereby advancing knowledge further. This book is intended to exemplify the application of theory in practice across a number of applied domains. Appearing toward the beginning of each chapter is a section entitled 'Meet the

author'. The purpose of the section is to enable authors to articulate their induction into their particular field of coping research. Within this section authors may explicitly identify theories, influential researchers, encounters and/or life experiences that have influenced their own coping research and the resultant interpretation and application of information. It is important to acknowledge experiences and theoretical beliefs because these may influence the way in which information is presented. Within each chapter "thoughts are offered with the caveat that the associations offer readers a sense of links that I [we] intuitively make rather than connections they should share. Moreover, it is hoped and expected that others will find alternative associations" (Gilbourne and Richardson, 2005, p. 328). I would encourage readers to critically consider the way in which authors present and utilise theory and empirical literature considering where there is agreement and where there is not. It is only through an ongoing critical analysis of existing research, theory and practice that we will advance the coping field and prevent stagnation. In order to facilitate critical thinking, readers are provided with activity and focus boxes throughout the text regarding the application of coping theory.

The book begins by outlining in chapter one the principles upon which this book is founded, that is the importance of applying theory in practice. This is followed by a brief overview of common classifications of coping theories. Chapters two, three and four explore the application of stress and coping theory in three sporting contexts (respectively athlete, sports officials and sports coaches). Each chapter highlights a different theoretical issue debated within the coping literature concluding with a case study that exemplifies the application of theory in practice. Exploring stress and coping research from three sporting perspectives provides an opportunity to consider those demands faced by individuals occupying different roles within a sporting context.

In chapter five Tony Cassidy presents literature exploring occupational stress. The chapter begins by categorising work stressors thereafter exploring variables that influence stress transactions. The positive elements of stress and coping are then explored before unpacking coping interventions. Within chapter six Jennifer Brown looks at stress in policing. The chapter presents the evolution of stress research from an area of research interest to one that informed policy development and practice interventions. In chapter seven Tony Cassidy focuses on stress, coping, resilience and health. Having defined stress, sources of stressors are explored, this is followed by variables that influence stress transactions concluding with coping interventions. In chapter eight Erica Frydenberg outlines the move from considerations about stress to how we deal with stress; that is, coping. The latter part of the chapter reports a selection of studies exploring coping and coping interventions. In chapter nine Claire Hayes presents an overview of cognitive behavioural theory, research evidence supporting its use in enhancing coping, and its application in practice.

Chapters two through nine conclude with a chapter review prepared by an expert in the field and intended to draw out the key points which they derived from the chapter. The rationale for the chapter review is to exemplify the interpretations of individuals working/researching within the coping field. To what extent do you agree with these reviews? What would you add given the chance? How would you take the information forward? These are all questions I would encourage you to ask and endeavour to address.

Within chapter ten Lynne Johnston, Andrew Hutchison and Barry Ingham draw the book to a close by proposing the use of case formulation as a clinical tool for use in the stress and coping context. The chapter demonstrates how formulating individual case studies offers a

dynamic and holistic approach toward the development and implementation of practical interventions. The authors indicate how the formulation process may help bridge the gap between theory and practice by offering a means of appropriately linking interventions to stress and coping theory.

I would like to thank all contributors for their theoretical, empirical and practical insights into coping within different domains. Sharing these thoughts, arguments, data and personal insights contributes to an enhanced understanding of stress and coping for both academics and practitioners. The ultimate objective of this book is to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and I believe that the contributors have helped achieve this. It is my hope that readers will agree with this summary, enjoy reading the book, and that it provokes an enhanced critical awareness of theory and its potential utility in applied practice. I would welcome feedback from readers in informing future revisions to this text.

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Chapter 1

A BRIEF REVIEW OF COMMONLY USED THEORIES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF APPLYING THEORY IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

The chapter begins by outlining the importance of applying theory in practice. The purpose is to set the context for the remaining chapters each of which endeavours to exemplify the way in which theory can inform practice. The present chapter then offers a summary of the most salient stress theories from distinct classifications, those being stimulus-based; transactional-based and resource-based. It also presents a review of a more recent theoretical framework, namely, proactive coping.

INTRODUCTION

There are many conceptualisations of stress and coping available. These conceptualisations have been applied in numerous domains resulting in a great volume of research. A review of all relevant literatures is beyond the scope of this chapter, as such, the focus is on presenting exemplars of distinct classifications of stress theories reported within the coping literature.

Outlining the central tenants of coping theories offers an important contribution to the coping literature as it enables researchers and practitioners to consider how these may be applied in practice. Throughout this book readers will be encouraged to consider how theory may be applied in their own applied research or practice.

THE IMPORTANCE OF APPLYING THEORY IN PRACTICE

A criticism of coping research voiced by academics and practitioners alike is the lack of applied research that strives to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Dewe and Trenberth, 2004; Lazarus, 2001). Folkman (2009, p. 76) notes that in most coping research “what may ultimately be the most important translation - the translation to practice – is barely touched upon. Often those who do theory development or research consider the translation from theory and research to practice to be another person’s job”. Theoretical models provide the ‘building blocks’ for coping intervention design, implementation and provide a means for testing their effectiveness (Rutter and Quine, 2002). They do so by helping to focus research questions and place them in a logical order, and by providing a framework within which findings can be interpreted (Folkman, 2009). An intervention programme or applied practice informed by theory is more likely to be effective (Michie, Johnston, Francis, et al., 2008). Therefore, the challenge faced by coping researchers and applied practitioners alike is to develop systematic approaches toward embedding theory in practice (Michie et al., 2008).

The application of theory in applied research is important for three reasons:

1. Theory can improve intervention design and efficacy by focusing attention on determinants of stressors and coping behaviours (Crosby, Kegler, and DiClemente, 2009; Michie et al., 2008). It is less likely that the effectiveness of interventions targeting key determinants of coping behaviour (and utilising appropriate methods to facilitate coping) will be rejected on the grounds of poor design or delivery (Green, 2000).
2. Theory can enhance the evaluation of an intervention by identifying possible evaluation indicators which can be ordered temporally thereby constructing a proximal–distal chain of events (Green, 2000). Distinguishing between proximal and distal indicators facilitates an evaluation of the relative magnitude of anticipated change, which is generally greater in proximal indicators (e.g., change in beliefs) than in more distal indicators (e.g., change in behaviour). This may minimise the risk of failing to demonstrate change that has actually occurred as a result of the intervention. This outcome typically results from research designs that are insufficiently sensitive to detect change or those that focus on inappropriate variables (Green, 2000).
3. Utilising theory to inform practice enables its practical utility to be evaluated by practitioners across a range of contexts (Michie et al., 2008). By evaluating the outcomes of theoretically derived interventions it is possible to corroborate or modify theory accordingly.

STIMULUS-BASED MODELS

During a series of animal studies, endocrinologist Hans Selye (1956) observed a variety of non-specific stimulus events which he referred to as stressors (e.g., heat, cold, toxic agents), producing a response pattern he called the ‘General Adaptation Syndrome’ (GAS). Selye posits that the GAS proceeds in three stages; first, the alarm reaction comprises an

initial shock phase and a subsequent countershock phase. The shock phase involves the activation of the sympathetic nervous system. During the countershock phase defensive processes are initiated as characterised by increased adrenocortical activity. In a second stage, if a stressor endures the organism enters the stage of resistance. In this stage, the symptoms of the alarm reaction disappear, which seemingly indicates the organism's adaptation to the stressor. However, while resistance to the stressor increases, resistance to other kinds of stressors decreases due to the organisms depleted energies and resources. Finally, if the stressor persists, resistance gives way to stage three, the stage of exhaustion. When the organism's capability of adapting to the stressor is exhausted, the symptoms of the first stage reappear, but resistance is no longer possible as energies and resources are depleted. Irreversible tissue damage appears and if the stressor continues to persist the organism eventually dies (Selye, 1993).

Selye (1974, 1983, 1993) modified the GAS recognising that while stress could result in significant harm to the biological system, an absence of stress could also be harmful. From this Selye made the distinction between 'distress' and 'eustress'. He proposed that distress results from persistent demands that cannot be resolved through adaptation leading to diminished performance, negative feelings, and biological damage. Eustress occurs when the biological system possesses the energies and resources to adapt to demands leading to enhanced functioning, positive feelings, and human growth. Selye found that eustress presented little or no risk to the biological system concluding that this represents a positive aspect of stress. Within these modifications Selye acknowledged that the characteristics and/or perceptions of an event can influence the stress response. He also proposed that psychological arousal could be, and indeed was, one of the most frequent activators of the GAS response (Selye, 1983). However, Selye did not alter his basic theoretical premise that stress was a physiological phenomenon. He perceived the psychological components to be beyond his field of competence and called for his proposals to be further examined by those appropriately qualified (Tache and Selye, 1985).

Criticism of Selye's work has been directed at the theory's core assumption of a nonspecific causation of the GAS and the failure to distinguish triggers for the stress reaction (Furnham, 1997). A second criticism was that unlike the physiological stress investigated by Selye in animals, stress experienced by humans is almost always the result of a cognitive mediation (Lazarus, 1966; Lyon, 2000). Stimulus based models offer an overly simplistic view of stressors or demands as existing somewhere objectively outside the person, and an equally simplistic view that the person reacts passively to these demands through a process of coping. What evolved from criticisms of the stimulus-based models was the idea that stress occurred when environmental demands and individual susceptibilities interacted as opposed to a simplistic reaction.

TRANSACTIONAL-BASED MODELS

Transactional models contend that the way in which an individual interprets a stressor determines how they respond to in terms of emotional reactions, behavioural responses, and coping efforts. An individual's interpretation is influenced by factors such as personal and social resources as well as characteristics of the stressful experience. Thus, transactional models contend that the outcomes of a stressful encounter are determined by many factors.

Whilst many versions of this basic transactional model have been proposed it is the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (TMSC: Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) later revised to the Cognitive Motivational Relational Theory (CMRT: Lazarus, 1991a, 1999, 2000) that has been the guiding theory for a great deal of coping research (Aldwin, 1994; Frydenberg and Lewis, 2004).

Lazarus and Folkman presented the TMSC in their book 'Stress, appraisal and coping' (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), and since that time it has been further developed and refined. The TMSC conceives a reciprocal, bi-directional relational process between the person and the environment which transact to form new meanings through appraisal processes. Cognitive appraisal is the evaluation of the significance of what is happening in the person-environment relationship. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that the cognitive appraisal of a stressor involves both primary and secondary appraisals which occur at virtually the same time and interact to determine the significance and meaning of events with regards to well-being. During primary appraisal, an individual considers the significance of a situation with regard to his or her own values, personal beliefs, situational intentions, goal commitments and well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). These mechanisms of primary appraisal result in an event being interpreted in one of three ways; 1) irrelevant, where there are no implications for well-being, 2) benign/positive/beneficial, where the event is perceived to preserve or enhance well-being, and 3) stressful, where there is a perceived harm/loss, threat and/or challenge to well-being. Appraisals of harm/loss are characterised by perceptions that damage has already been sustained. A threat appraisal occurs when harm or loss are possible. A challenge appraisal reflects a perception that there may be an opportunity for mastery and gain (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Coping is only required following events that are perceived as stressful and as such benign or positive appraisals do not require coping responses (Anshel and Delany, 2001). The primary appraisals of harm/loss, threat or challenge are not mutually exclusive, thus it is possible for an individual to appraise an event in more than one way at the same time. For example, an individual may appraise an impending exam as both a threat and challenge. An exam may be appraised as a challenge because it offers an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, competency, and attain course credits. The same exam may also be appraised as a threat because the individual must pass the exam in order to progress with their studies, and attain a particular grade to meet their personal goals. The individual may fear that they may not perform as well as they believe themselves to be capable of thus presenting the potential for loss/harm.

Secondary appraisal refers to a cognitive-evaluative process that focuses on minimising harm or maximising gains through coping responses. This involves an evaluation of coping options and available resources that may include social, physical, psychological and material assets (Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Wells and Matthews (1994) describe this level of processing as the principal determinant of coping and stress reactions, enabling the identification of coping procedures that match the immediate situation. Perceived control over events is considered during secondary appraisal as the individual decides what can or cannot be done to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as surpassing a person's resources (Burns and Egan, 1994). An individual's confidence in their ability to execute courses of action or attain specific performance outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) is also evident during secondary appraisal as they influence task selection and the effort expended in task completion. This has implications for the coping outcome; it is not enough to possess the skills of competent coping alone. Not only must an individual believe they

have coping skills, they must also be confident to use them when the situation demands their use (Roskies and Lazarus, 1980). Following a coping response, the outcome is reviewed or re-appraised (tertiary appraisal or reappraisal) and another coping response may follow.

Lazarus presented conceptual developments from the early TMSC to the Cognitive-Motivational-Relational theory of emotions (CMRT) in his books 'Emotion and adaptation' (Lazarus, 1991b) and 'Passion and reason: Making sense of our emotions' (Lazarus and Lazarus, 1994). While TMSC is centred on psychological states experienced during transactions between the person and the environment in situations appraised as taxing or exceeding resources and/or endangering well-being (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the CMRT is focused on emotion. CMRT suggests that emotions arise from the relational meaning of an encounter between a person and the environment. An emotion is elicited by appraisals of environmental demands, constraints, and resources, and also by their juxtaposition with a person's motives and beliefs. Each emotion involves a different core relational theme (Lazarus 1991a, 1991b, 1991c) as each emotion is brought about by appraisal of the personal significance of an encounter.

Lazarus suggested that approximately 15 different emotions (Lazarus 1991a, 1991b) can be identified. Nine he described as goal incongruent emotions, namely; anger, fright, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, envy, jealousy and disgust. Four he termed goal congruent emotions, namely; happiness, pride, relief and love, and three emotions whose valence he described as equivocal or mixed: hope, compassion and gratitude. Table 1.1 presents core relational themes for each of these emotions as suggested by Lazarus (1991b, p. 13).

Table 1.1. Core relational themes for emotions (Lazarus, 1991b, p. 13)

Emotion	Core relational themes
Anger	A demeaning offense against me and mine
Anxiety	Facing uncertain, existential threat
Fright	An immediate, concrete, and overwhelming physical danger
Guilt	Having transgressed a moral imperative
Shame	Failing to live up to an ego-ideal
Sadness	Having experienced an irrevocable loss
Envy	Wanting what someone else has
Jealousy	Resenting a third party for the loss of, or a threat to, another's affection or favour
Disgust	Taking in or being too close to an indigestible object or (metaphorically speaking) idea
Happiness	Making reasonable progress toward the realisation of a goal
Pride	Enhancement of one's ego-identity by taking credit for a valued object or achievement, either one's own or that of someone or group with whom one identifies
Relief	A distressing goal-incongruent condition that has changed for the better or gone away
Hope	Fearing the worst but wanting better
Love	Desiring or participating in affection, usually but not necessarily reciprocated
Compassion	Being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help

With reference to the core relational themes, the CMRT suggests that, "for each emotion, there are at most six appraisal-related decisions to make, sometimes less, creating a rich and

diverse cognitive pattern with which to describe the relational meanings which distinguish any emotion from each of the others.” (Lazarus, 1991b, p. 216). Three are primary appraisal components including: goal relevance (the extent to which an encounter relates to personal goals); goal congruence or incongruence (the extent to which a transaction is consistent or inconsistent with what the person wants); and type of ego involvement (consideration of diverse aspects of ego-identity or personal commitments). The remaining three are secondary appraisal components including: an evaluation of blame or credit (establishing where possible who or what is accountable or responsible); coping potential (if and how the demands can be managed by the individual); and future expectations (whether for any reason, things are likely to change becoming more or less goal congruent). The specific combination of primary and secondary appraisals is proposed to influence the intensity and type of emotion elicited. In addition to appraisals, how the individual copes with situations or events will also mediate the type and intensity of emotions they experience (Lazarus, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c).

Essentially, the TMSC and CMRT are both structured around transactions between: 1) antecedent variables (environmental variables such as demands, resources and constraints, and personality variables such as motives and beliefs about the self and the world); 2) mediating processes (appraisal, core relational themes, and coping processes); and 3) outcomes (acute outcomes such as immediate emotions, and long-term outcomes such as chronic emotional patterns, well-being, and physical health).

CONSERVATION OF RESOURCES THEORY

Hobfoll (2001) contends that the majority of work utilising Lazarus’ transactional theory focuses on the appraisal aspects, which is only one component of the stress process. Within his Conservation of Resource theory (COR: Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) Hobfoll suggests that resource loss is central to the stress process. Stress is a reaction to an environment in which there is the threat of a loss of resources, an actual loss in resources, or failure to gain sufficient or expected resources following significant resource investment (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). Freund and Riediger (2001, p. 373) defined resources as the “actual or potential means for achieving personal goals”. They assert that, that which constitutes a resource can only be defined with regards to a specific goal. Resources may include objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies (Hobfoll, 2001; Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). Hobfoll (2001) suggested that whilst cognitive appraisals are one means to assess resource loss, most resources are objectively determined and observable.

Two main principles accompany COR, the primacy of resource loss and resource investment. The primacy of resource loss principle contends that given equal amounts of loss and gain, loss will have significantly greater impact in health outcomes, emotional experience, and stress reactions. When individuals experience a chronic lack of resources, they are more vulnerable to further loss of resources (Freedy and Hobfoll, 1994). In essence, those with fewer resources fall behind to a greater extent than those who begin with more resources. Hobfoll (1989, 2001) describes this phenomenon as resource loss and resource gain spirals. Resource loss can lead to further loss in resources, conditions that should cause higher vulnerability. On the other hand, resources gains could result in further gains, so that people might tend to be less vulnerable.