



COPING IN CHALLENGING TIMES



The challenges of the past couple of years have been trying for many of us. For many this has brought to the fore their beliefs about their ability to cope with challenging situations. "I can't cope with that", "it's too much for me", "it's overwhelming" are all forms of negative coping beliefs. They commonly contribute to emotional distress, being particularly common with anxiety. These beliefs all reflect a person's self-efficacy, being their perceived ability to deal with a particular challenge or situation (Bandura, 1982). As such, they affect our resilience in the face of adversity (Benight & Cieslak, 2011).

These negative coping beliefs reflect a form of all-or-nothing thinking that results in the individual perceiving they have no resources or capacity for dealing with a challenging situation. Interestingly, when questioned on why they perceive they have no capacity, people will tend to place conditional expectations upon how they believe they should cope. From clinical practice, some of the more common conditions people tend to place upon themselves with such coping beliefs are to get through emotionally challenging situations without being upset or distressed (e.g. I must get through this without becoming anxious), a need for control over events (e.g. I need to control the environment to protect myself), or expectations about achieving perfectionistic outcomes from situations (e.g. I must get everything done, and to the best standard, and within a set time frame) (Harris, Pepper, & Maack, 2008; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2005; O'Connor & O'Connor, 2003; Zvolensky et al., 2009). Such conditions are unrealistic and can then lock people into negative cycles which further heightens anxiety (Dunkley, Zuroff, & Blankstein, 2003). They also tend to confuse coping with thriving in the face of challenge.

This is because the unrealistic nature of the expectations contribute to the overgeneralised belief that they have no capacity to cope with a situation (i.e. because I can't cope with this in the way I would like, I can't cope with this at all), thereby turning the perception of the situation from being a challenge to being a threat (Blascovich, 2008). The natural response of the brain to the perception of threat is then to activate anxiety, and subsequently to promote drives to fight, flight, or flee. This subsequently impacts upon motivational systems and behavioural choices, most typically promoting avoidance and inhibiting the activation of more adaptive problem solving (Mofield, Peters, & Chakraborti-Ghosh, 2016). Such drives for avoidance can manifest in a range of different behaviours, including procrastination, direct avoidance of challenges, problematic behaviours for distraction, over preparing for challenges (negatively impacting on time management), and even substance use. However, while these may then be undesirable ways of coping that don't help us to achieve our goals as we would like, they are still forms of coping.

One of the ways to resolve these negative coping beliefs is to re-assess the meaning of the phrase "to cope". The Oxford dictionary defines the term "cope" as "dealing effectively with something difficult" (Oxford University Press, 2013). At a base level the primary situation, or difficulty, we all have to deal with is life. Based on this, as long as we can survive the challenges we face, we are dealing effectively with life to some degree. So, while it may be true that we may not be able to cope with being hit by a bus, as it may literally prove fatal, we can cope with events like a relationship breakup, loss of a job, or having multiple demands on us. Further to this, it is important to recognise that the emotional system, and the behaviours they promote, is a coping system in itself, having evolved to help with early survival (LeDoux, 2019). Unfortunately, when we get into distressed states, the coping responses motivated by our emotional system may not be nuanced enough to help us to cope in the ways we might like to. A more accurate phrase to represent this is that "I'm not coping as well as I would like". This subtle shift provides a more incremental view of coping, viewing coping as a matter of degrees, and can help break us out of the problematic all or nothing thinking (O'Connor & O'Connor, 2003). Subsequently, this can provide a path to coping better, as we can then work on coping in gradually better ways, rather than putting unrealistic expectations on ourselves to

immediately change from coping poorly to thriving in difficult situations. What's more, this is in line with how our brains learn, adapt and change.

Another benefit of this change in perspective is that it can also allow for the appreciation of challenging contexts on the ways we do cope. For instance, not expecting oneself to cope to the same degree with a task when we are under little pressure compared to when we are under high levels of pressure or facing multiple demands. Again, this appreciation of context can help to break the self-maintaining cycles of anxiety, removing unrealistic expectations of ourselves and helping us to cope with situations in a calmer and less anxious manner.

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