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Factors facilitating constructive coping with stress

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Abstract

This review focuses on coping with stress, with particular emphasis on mechanisms facilitating constructive coping with stress. An important area of contemporary research is the attempt to identify factors that make it possible to stay mentally healthy or preventing the weakening of the cognitive and social functioning. The currently prevailing approach to stress is the relational approach. According to this approach, the criterion for the occurrence of stress is the cognitive assessment of the situation made by an individual. This review presents the most recent proposals concerning the analysis of specific methods of coping with stress, in particular from the perspective of their adaptiveness. Particular attention is paid to meaning-focused coping. We also discuss the presence of positive emotions in difficult situations. Positive emotions may play many adaptive functions especially in long-term stress situations: they make it possible to rebuild physical, intellectual and social resources, and they also extend the scope of attention and action. Positive emotions may also, to a certain extent, mitigate psychological and physiological consequences of stressful events. Finally we discuss the main directions of research related to factors determining well-being and sample experiments aimed at intensifying the feeling of happiness.

Keywords: Stress, mental health, well-being, coping mechanism

Introduction

The issue of stress is a subject of both theoretical analysis and clinical practice. Growing focus may be currently observed on resources which facilitate constructive coping with stress, fighting crises and staying mentally healthy (1).

The current prevailing approach to stress is the relational approach. The popularization of this approach is mostly credited to Lazarus, who together with his colleagues created the transactional model of stress and coping (2-4). This model had a considerable impact on research in the field of stress.

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It is still accepted by researchers, just as its modified version proposed by Folkman (5-9). Stress is seen as a relationship between a person and the environment which is considered by a given individual to be burdening or exceeding their resources and threatening their well-being (3). The stress is not a result of objective conditions only, neither does it depend on the individual only but is conditioned by both the environment as well as the characteristics of a given person. The criterion for the occurrence of stress is the cognitive assessment of the situation made by an individual. It consists of identifying relations between requirements related to a given situation and characteristics of an individual and their coping abilities.

Another concept worth mentioning that is essential for the contemporary understanding of stress is the Conservation of Resources Theory by Hobfoll (10). Hobfoll treats stress as an objective phenomenon as he believes that resources, being the key element of his stress theory, are defined in an objective way. Their conservation, retention, promotion and obtaining are the purpose of human activity. The resources may include: objects, conditions, skills, personal characteristics, knowledge, money etc. Stress is related to the loss of resources, risk of losing resources, as well as a situation when investing resources does not bring the expected results. An important implication of Hobfoll's theory (10) is the fact that the risk of resources loss affects particularly those people whose resources are scarce. This regularity may be an explanation for the passivity of some people in stressful situations. Their passivity may result from the tendency to protect resources. The fact that Hobfoll ascribes objectivity to the phenomenon of stress by adopting the assumption concerning the objective value of resources is arguable. The opposing approach to this issue is connected with the Relational Model of Values (11). According to this model, the value of individual resources results from the relation between needs and goals of an individual and characteristics of the situation existing at a given moment. It shows a high dynamics of valuating individual resources and the multidimensionality of valuations. Additionally, the perception of losing or obtaining given resources may change over time. It is the result of a number of psychological mechanisms e.g. defense mechanisms

notably rationalization (12), the phenomenon of affective adaptation called the hedonic treadmill (13), as well as meaning-focused coping (7,9). The dynamics may be illustrated by a situation when an individual loses a given resource to which he/she attributed special sense, ascribed positive value to a given event and has for some time treated this experience as a resource facilitating for example his/her personal development and reorganization of priorities.

An additional issue concerns the awareness of having certain resources or them being available. There have been situations in clinical practice where passivity of a given person is not so much the result of a lack of appropriate resources to handle a difficult situation, but rather not being aware of possessing them, in which case therapeutic activities may change the perception of one's own coping abilities (14).

Coping with stress

Coping strategies may have various forms. Relevant literature presents a number of various classifications related to coping with stress.

This paper presents the most recent proposals as regards the analysis of specific ways of coping with stress, particularly from the perspective of their adaptiveness. Folkman and Moskowitz (9) point to an interesting type of stress coping strategy, i.e. meaning-focused coping which may be defined as attempts to find positive meaning of a difficult situation.

It is not in opposition to the problem-focused coping (activities directly related to solving the problem), or emotion-based coping (focus on one's own emotions related to a given problem), previously introduced in the literature (3, 5).

Folkman and Moskowitz (9) discuss five types of meaning-focused coping which will be presented later. A commonly known form is the positive reappraisal. It is related to discovering possibilities of personal development. It makes it possible to find positive aspects of a difficult situation; its favorable impact on certain dimension of functioning (7). The term benefit finding, i.e. finding benefits of stressful situations, can also be found in Folkman and

Moskowitz's works (7, 9). This strategy seems to be very similar to positive reappraisal.

The strategy called benefit reminding is also related thereto. It is connected with cognitive effort thanks to which positive aspects identified at some point may remain permanently in an individual's awareness, thus having a favorable influence on the current perception of their situation.

Another form of meaning-focused coping is changing one's goals (9). In a situation when goals that have been important until now turn out to be unreachable, the adaptive form of coping involves verification of one's goals in such a way that makes it possible to use the resources and abilities available and, at the same time, abandon aspirations that have become unrealistic.

Another possibility under the meaning-focused coping is infusing ordinary events with meaning (7). It involves infusing everyday ordinary aspects of life with a deeper meaning. An example of which may be giving a special meaning to shared watching a sunset, looking at beautiful flowers etc. This is related to a cognitive effort of an individual who consciously gives special meaning to certain situations, thus giving them a new quality. Apart from infusing random situations with meaning, it is also possible to plan and prepare such events (7). The research on caregivers to people with AIDS (5) showed that almost all respondents reported the existence of this type of coping while taking care of the sick and mourning. Folkman and Moskowitz (7, 9) are of the opinion that meaning-focused coping is not sufficiently taken into account in case of currently used tools for measuring coping strategies. An important question asked by the authors is the question of the possibility to acquire the ability to use the aforementioned mechanisms. One of the methods to shape them may involve therapeutic interventions (8).

Relevant literature puts more and more emphasis on the significance of positive emotions when fighting a given problem (7-9). As it has already been mentioned, positive emotions may, among other things, be a result of meaning-focused coping. Undeniably the ability to create positive emotional states is important.

A detailed analysis of favorable results of experiencing positive emotions was presented by

Fredrickson (15), who underlines that positive emotions may play many adaptive functions especially in long-term stress situations: they make it possible to rebuild physical, intellectual and social resources, and they also extend the scope of attention and action. Positive emotions may also, to a certain extent, mitigate psychological and physiological consequences of stressful events. An experiment related to this issue involved exposing the participants to video clips of various emotional overtones (16). First, all participants watched a clip inducing fear. Then they were divided into four groups with each one watching a different clip: neutral, sad, evoking contentment and amusement. Based on the monitoring of cardiovascular reactivity, it was observed that the participants who watched clips evoking contentment and amusement were the quickest to regain balance.

Other studies which involved the analysis of the functions of the neuroendocrine system (17) showed that women, who were able to find a positive overtone in some traumatic events, had hormonal reactions that were better for their health. It was also shown that positive emotions prevent rumination of negative thoughts and emotions (18).

Experiencing positive emotions seems to be particularly important in case of chronic stress when there is a risk of exhausting resources available to an individual and his/her social environment (19).

An example of research focusing on the dynamics of emotions in a situation of a long-term stress is the research on partners of people with AIDS published in 1997 by Folkman very often referred to in relevant literature (5). It turned out that partners of terminally ill people did experience a lot of negative emotions; however it was not the only dimension of their emotional response. They also experienced positive emotions. Except for weeks preceding and directly following death of HIV-infected patients, their partners experienced positive emotional states with a frequency similar to the frequency of the occurrence of negative emotions.

It proves certain independence of positive and negative emotions (6, 7). Several other authors also prove the co-occurrence of positive emotions in stressful situations (20-23). The degree of independence of positive and negative emotions is not however a permanent value but depends on two main factors. One of them is the weight ascribed to a given

goal. The second however is the intensity of the emotional response: the more emotional a response is, the stronger the reverse of relation between positive and negative emotions (24-26).

It is worth mentioning that what is important in case of analyzing chronic stress is not so the co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions in a given moment but more their co-occurrence in a longer time horizon (7), which is related to the possibility of rebuilding resources thanks to experiencing positive emotions. In a longer time horizon positive emotions play an important adaptive role. Thanks to the functions they play, they create favorable conditions for staying mentally healthy (15, 27, 28).

An important trend in research in this field is the search for factors influencing the level of happiness (29-32). An important issue here is to define what makes it possible to feel happy despite experiencing life difficulties.

The following are developing within this field: hedonic approach to happiness, whose representatives focus on mood, balance of emotional experiences, sense of satisfaction (29,30), and eudaimonic approach emphasizing the significance of the feeling of meaning and purpose in life, hierarchy of values and long-term objectives (31, 32).

The research which has been done so far in this field indicates that it is not always possible to translate theoretical differentiation between the hedonic and eudaimonic views into operationalization of variables (33, 34). The research reveals that there is a correlation between hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to happiness (34). Kashdan, Biswas-Diener and King (34) are of the opinion that in order to gain full understanding of well-being, it is necessary to take into consideration both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of happiness, while others (35) claim that only after combining these two views will we get a full picture of broadly-understood happiness.

Seligman's exhaustive description of well-being (32) can be viewed as an example of a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic approaches. The author decomposes happiness into three types of lives: the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. It can be assumed that the first type of life corresponds, to some extent, to a hedonic approach to happiness, however one must bear in mind that

positive emotions may be derived not only from experiencing pleasure but also from accomplishing important goals, actions to which an individual attributes some sense (7,9). The two other types of happiness, i.e. the meaningful life and the engaged life, on the other hand, may represent the eudaimonic theory of happiness.

The synthesis of eudaimonic and hedonic approaches to happiness can also be found in the previously described model of broadening and building positive emotions proposed by Fredrickson (15). According to the author, positive emotions help to rebuild physical, intellectual and social resources, and they also extend the scope of perception. Thus, it is possible to conclude that positive experiences from the hedonic level contribute to developing resources which make it possible to experience eudaimonic dimension of happiness.

Yet another concept of happiness which encompasses both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives is the onion theory of happiness formulated by Czapinski (36). From the three layers that build the sense of happiness, the outermost is a hedonic aspect comprising current affective experiences and partial satisfaction concerning many aspects of life, e.g. professional career, place of residence, close interpersonal relations. The middle layer is a combination of hedonic (affect balance and cognitive appraisals) and eudaimonic aspects (feeling of meaning and purpose in life, integration and interpretation of events). The innermost and, at the same time, the most stable layer is the will to live which is, to a great extent, determined by genes. Therefore, the construct of will to live in the onion theory of happiness corresponds to the understanding of happiness propagated by supporters of genetic theories of happiness (37-38).

Possibilities to affect the level of well-being

An important issue in this context is a possibility to affect the level of happiness through professional interventions (8, 30, 39-43). The main premise in the research on therapeutic interventions with the aim of boosting mental well-being is a conviction that it is possible to modify this variable. Despite evidence on

the existence of factors stabilizing the feeling of happiness over a longer period of time (among other things, genetic predispositions, stability of personal traits, phenomenon of hedonic adaptation), most researchers emphasize the fact that there is a sub-scope subject to modifications (30, 35). The assumed range of the modifiable sub-scope varies slightly from one researcher to another. It is however worth noting that even conclusions arising from the concept emphasizing the importance of genes for the level of happiness do not imply full determinism in this scope. David Lykken (38) highlighted the fact that genes affect levels of happiness indirectly through influencing the specificity of an individual's experiences. This specificity is mainly a derivative of temperamental and personality traits: extraversion and neuroticism. In light of the above, it is possible to modify the impact associated with genetic factors through conscious actions.

In their model, Sonja Lyubomirsky et al (43) concluded that fifty percent of happiness level is determined by genetics, ten percent is affected by life circumstances understood as demographical variables, place of residence and living conditions, and a remaining forty percent of happiness is governed by intentional activities undertaken by an individual. This last category is characterized by intentionality and necessity to make an effort, and encompasses not only behavioral but also cognitive and volitional activities.

Sheldon and Lyubomirsky (44) highlighted the fact that when designing intervention programs, it is necessary to take into account many factors affecting their effectiveness, such as, among other things, optimal frequency of activities leading to increases in well-being; their alignment with an individual's preferences; proper setting in culture.

It is worth to mention two experiments with college students conducted by Sonja Lyubomirsky and her team (44). In the first experiment, the students were asked to commit five so called acts of kindness a week. Such acts of kindness included activities beneficial to other people, such as donating blood, paying a visit to a sick person. After a six-week period of following the guidelines, this intervention was proved effective for at least short period of time. The participants who completed this exercise reported increase in well-being. At the same time, well-being

in the control group was found to decrease. In the second experiment, the participants of the intervention group were asked to list good things that happened to them either three times a week or once a week. This exercise also took six weeks to complete and involved the participation of a control group. The result indicating increases in well-being was reported only in the group that performed the recommended activity once a week (*ibidem*).

The literature on the subject often describes an intervention conducted by Martin Seligman (41) with the use of internet. In this exercise, the respondents were asked to perform five activities, the aim of which was to help them appreciate good things, increase their awareness of their strong personality traits, life's positives and previously achieved successes. The results revealed that in short-term perspective all exercises had a positive influence on the participants' well-being (increase in happiness and decrease in depressive symptoms), however, it were exercises where the participants were asked to use their top positive strengths in a completely new way and analyze positive events in their lives that gave positive benefits for the longest period of time. This program after some modifications is currently used under the name of positive psychotherapy (41).

It is worth noting that despite a slightly different set of notions, similar ideas are propagated in other theories. The goals of the interventions described above are to a large extent aligned with the abovementioned model of broadening and building positive emotions proposed by Barbara Fredrickson (15, 16, 27, 28), or the model of mindfulness (45).

That construct mindfulness incorporates two main factors: self-regulated attention and an orientation on experience characterized by curiosity, openness and acceptance. This enhances capacity of sustained attention, which allows an individual to see more details and additional solutions not easily identified in a schematic way of assessing circumstances (45). Langer (46) emphasized the fact that many negative life appraisals result from automatic and schematic assessments, often based on external criteria. Mindfulness makes it possible for individuals to distance themselves from the above mentioned factors and gain greater independence in assessing their own situation. The practice of mindfulness is not connected with any religion and can be used by

anyone, irrespective of the culture in which they live or grew up (45).

The model of mindfulness has been adapted and developed into a new trend in cognitive behavioral therapy, so called “third wave” including, among other things, mindfulness-based stress reduction (45), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (47). It is also exploited by other schools of psychology, such as gestalt, psychodynamic approach, and process-oriented therapy.

Psychologists are still carrying out research on the mechanism of mindfulness and its influence on well-being. Started in the 1970s, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is the longest standing eight-week program (45). MBSR is the first psychological intervention based on mindfulness techniques which gave rise to the entire “third wave” of cognitive behavioral therapies.

Experimental studies prove its effectiveness. For instance, Oman and his research associates (48) compared a group of students who participated in MBSR program with the wait-list control group. The results showed that the level of perceived stress in the participants of both programs decreased significantly after the completion of the program and in comparison with the control group, at the same time their inclination to forgive increased. Even after two months of completing the program, this difference was still substantial.

Conclusion

To sum up the main topics discussed above, it can be concluded that current research shows growing interest in mechanisms that enable individuals to remain mentally healthy and cope with stressful situations in a constructive way.

Contemporary researchers define stress mainly as a relation between a human being and the environment, which is assessed by individuals as burdensome or exceeding their resources and posing a threat to their well-being. This means that the awareness of one's own resources and the ability to use them is of crucial importance.

Researchers highlight also the fact that special coping mechanisms which particularly contribute to

maintaining mental health help individuals to adapt to the circumstances.

The issue regarding the possibilities of developing abilities to apply constructive stress coping mechanisms requires further investigation.

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