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Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective

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BOOK REVIEWS

Stress, Coping, and Development: An Integrative Perspective, by Carolyn M. Aldwin. New York: The Guilford Press, 1994. 331 pp. \$32.50 cloth. ISBN 0-89862-261-1.

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Stress and coping is a much researched, though surprisingly ill-researched area of study. Since 1978 there have been more than 10,000 articles written on stress and coping, and Aldwin's book masterfully ties it all together. Much of the research on stress and coping has been focused on either the effect of stress on the development of illness or on the efficacy of different coping methods for different illness or traumas. Aldwin does a massive review of this literature, showing different lines of academic thought and the inadequacy of such discrete lines compared to the complexity of reality. She also adds a review of the literature showing how stress can be beneficial to people, a rarely researched idea.

For the practitioner, Aldwin's focus on complexity is a welcome change that mirrors what we see when dealing with real people and situations. For academic purposes, it is useful to assume people can be dichotomized into "emotional" or "rational" stress responders, but real people often use many different strategies at once or in sequence to deal with problems. One common perspective assumes people have a fixed personality trait for how they cope, yet more qualitative studies show this is untrue and that coping traits are amenable to change as part of child and adult maturation. After hearing a discussion about someone else's experience, people may try out that person's coping technique on their own; for the practitioner this highlights the benefits of working with groups as a way to teach skills gently.

Another key idea Aldwin brings out is the value of seeing the person as

part of a social and economic system and a subculture within that system. Losing one's job is very different for a teenager earning some pocket money, a single parent living on the edge, or a corporate executive. It is different depending on the industry you work in and the age of one's children, one's general health, and so on. It is interesting to note that people who are bicultural (i.e., Japanese-American) often have two sets of coping strategies, one for each culture.

Stress research often looked at the result of a trauma such as a natural disaster or war or rape, but did not often consider prior events. Stress usually has cumulative effects and more than one major stress in a short time may overwhelm a person physically or mentally. Aldwin notes that the largest source of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is automobile accidents, a fairly widespread event, although the media often focus on war veterans as having this problem. Also, the strongest predictor of ill-health was the stressful accumulation of small "hassles" rather than one major event.

Much stress research depends on questionnaire data but interview data show that people's coping responses are very situation specific. Also people's reports of how they cope may not correspond to what they actually do. Is coping a rational process that we will or is it unconscious? Aldwin gives us a long list of the scales used in this literature and their sources. But we would like to know if some strategies work well, so we can recommend them to clients.

Aldwin looks at the developmental aspects of coping, discussing philosophical and religious ideas of how to deal with suffering and then looks at the positive effects stress can have. She finds humans modify themselves and their environments from the time they are fetuses kicking their displeasure. Much research is needed, though, on how to promote adaptive coping in children. Adults often are able to achieve a transformation after conquering a difficult stress, whether it be learning new skills to cope with the death of a loved one or a new appreciation of life after facing severe illness. In the end, she concludes that the role of the professional, in research or practice, is to help others develop ways of mindful coping, giving them new perspectives and skills.