



A process-oriented perspective examining the relationships among daily coping, stress, and affect



Jessica M. Blaxton*, C.S. Bergeman

Psychology Department, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, United States

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ABSTRACT

We assess the daily relationships between age, three functional coping strategies, and positive and negative affect while accounting for the individual's cognitive appraisal of the severity and controllability of their encountered stressor. We collected 56 days of daily data from participants in the Notre Dame Study of Healthy & Well-Being assessing affect, the most bothersome event experienced each day, and coping strategies used to deal with that event ($N = 371$; Age 44–87; $M = 67.41$; $SD = 8.87$). Multi-level modeling allowed us to explore and compare the between- and within-person effects. The main effects revealed that coping strategies relate to affect differently. The interaction terms revealed that the effectiveness of each coping strategy depended on characteristics of the encountered stressor and/or characteristics of the individual. Average values of stress severity, Altering the Meaning, and Dispelling the Effects more strongly related to PA or NA than daily fluctuations on these constructs. Findings illustrate that certain coping strategies target affect differently. Approaching research questions regarding stress and coping with a process-oriented perspective, through the use of daily data, allows for a more thorough understanding of the real-time, lived relationships among the individual, stress, and coping.

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Evolutionarily, stress motivates and protects individuals from hazardous environmental conditions, but as individuals experience more stress in their everyday lives, this protective resource extracts a toll on well-being (Sapolsky, 2004). That is, without proper modulation, stress can lead to an increased risk of negative emotional and physiological consequences due to its detrimental effects on neuroendocrine, cardiovascular, immune, and metabolic systems. In fact, research illustrates that greater affective reactivity, or the daily relationship between stress and negative affect (NA), predicts emotional (Charles, Piazza, Mogle, Sliwinski, & Almeida, 2013) and physical health (Piazza, Charles, Sliwinski, Mogle, & Almeida, 2012) as much as 10 years later. Effective Coping protects individuals from the negative effects of stress by disrupting the link between stress and well-being (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978); however, the effectiveness and importance of certain coping strategies may change as individuals age (Aldwin, Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Taylor, 2011). Because individuals differ in the way they experience the stress-affect relationship and use coping strategies, it is important to examine these relationships at the daily level in order to account for intraindividual variability and individual differences in that variability (Stone & Neale, 1984). The current study uses 56 days of daily data to examine the dynamic relationships between age, stress, and coping on NA and positive affect (PA), which can ultimately

contribute to the development of interventions and preventative care aimed toward disrupting the link between daily affective reactivity and negative psychological and physiological outcomes.

Stressful encounters begin with a two-part *cognitive appraisal*, during which the individual first appraises how much their situation threatens their well-being, termed *primary appraisal*, and then determines what, if anything, can be done to modulate their stressful situation, termed *secondary appraisal* (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). This appraisal process indicates that the severity of the stressor at hand (assessed during primary appraisal), as well as the controllability of the stressor (assessed during secondary appraisal) influence how individuals perceive their stressful circumstances and ultimately how they choose to cope with them. Researchers emphasize the need to study coping from a process-oriented perspective by gathering contextual information about the stressor, the individual, and the coping strategy (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tennen, Affleck, Armeli, & Carney, 2000), indicating that certain coping strategies can be effective in some situations but not others. For example, the improvements in emotional regulation that older adults experience to compensate for diminished physical or cognitive functioning (Urry & Gross, 2010) may not only influence the way they cope with stress over time (Aldwin et al., 2011), but reflect age differences in coping effectiveness. Consequently, coping cannot be separated from the context in which it arises, meaning both the person and environmental situation impact the coping process (Folkman

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: blaxton.1@nd.edu (J.M. Blaxton).

et al., 1986). The current study will explore the contextual factors of age, perceived stress severity, and perceived stress controllability and their relationships with various coping strategies and affect.

Although there are many different types of coping strategies, Pearlman and Schooler (1978) argue that coping has three functional purposes. First, individuals might *Alter the situation (Resituating)*, which involves focusing on the specific problem at hand and working to dispel that problem. Second, individuals might *Alter the meaning (Meaning-making)* by cognitively reducing the impact of the encountered stressor. Third, individuals might *Dispel the effects (Dispelling)* of stress by working to dissipate the emotional and physiological consequences associated with stress, which can help the individual adapt to their stressful circumstances without necessarily changing them or changing the meaning of them. Theorists suggest that certain functions of coping might be more effective in dealing with a specific stressor than others (Aldwin et al., 2011; Folkman et al., 1986; Pearlman & Schooler, 1978). For example, engaging in Resituating in response to an uncontrollable stressor may be less effective than Meaning-making in response to that stress. Empirically testing the contextual nature of these relationships requires information regarding both the encountered stressor and the coping strategies used, which can be tested with an idiographic perspective by examining these relationships in prospective time.

Researchers emphasize the need to study coping from a process-oriented perspective by gathering contextual information about the stressor, the individual, and the coping strategy. (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Tennen et al., 2000). By using an idiographic approach, through which relations between variables are observed within individuals over time, researchers can better test theories of coping that illustrate coping as a complex and dynamic process, dependent on individual characteristics and the stressor at hand (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009; Tennen et al., 2000). Research illustrates differences in retrospective and prospective strategies designed to capture the construct of coping (Ptacek, Smith, Espe, & Raffety, 1994; Tennen et al., 2000; Todd, Tennen, Carney, Armeli, & Affleck, 2004). Specifically, individuals have a tendency to over-report the effectiveness of coping in retrospective reports (Ptacek et al., 1994). Moreover, dispositional coping does not effectively predict intraindividual variability in coping or interindividual differences in that variability (Todd et al., 2004). These results suggest that the construct of coping may be too complex to study at the global level, and coping cannot be understood when removed from its related stressor.

Although much research has established the relationship between daily stress and affect (Charles et al., 2013; Sliwinski, Almeida, Smyth, & Stawski, 2009; Stawski, Sliwinski, Almeida, & Smyth, 2008; Piazza et al., 2012), less research has examined how coping impacts these relationships (Tennen et al., 2000). Daily designs are a particularly useful tool that can help researchers understand coping in real time, over multiple occasions, and in relation to specific stressors (Stone, Kennedy-Moore, & Neale, 1995; Tennen et al., 2000). Diary methods (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989) capture processes as they unfold, reflecting the “lived” experience of everyday life (Wheeler & Reis, 1991). A fundamental benefit of this method is that it allows researchers to assess reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context and provides complementary information to that acquired through more traditional designs (Bolger et al., 1989). A second benefit is the reduction in retrospective bias that may occur if the amount of time that elapses between an experience and the account of this experience is long. In this way, researchers can better understand the ebb and flow of the relationship between stress and coping.

Because between-person findings cannot be generalized to the within-person level (Molenaar & Campbell, 2009), the current study is largely exploratory in order to understand the relationships between age, stress, coping, and affect. The first aim of the current study is to understand the relationship between Pearlman and Schooler's (1978) three

functional aspects of coping and PA and NA. The second aim is to examine the extent to which the interaction between age, primary appraisal, and secondary appraisal with specific coping strategies relates to changes in affect. The final aim is to compare the impact of the between- and within-person effects of cognitive appraisal and coping on PA and NA.

1. Method

1.1. Sample

There were 371 participants from Wave 7 of the Notre Dame Study of Health & Well-Being (NDHWB), ranging in age from 44 to 87 ($M = 67.41$, $SD = 8.87$) recruited from a five-county region in Indiana. The NDHWB is a longitudinal study that conducts global and 56-day daily burst assessments of individual physical and emotional health (see Bergeman & Deboeck, 2014). The sample was 64% female and predominantly White (84%). The sample was representative of the region from which it came, with a diverse range of education (34% reported high school or lower as their highest level of education, and 34% reported having a college degree or higher) and income (20% reported making less than \$15,000, and 41% reported making more than \$40,000).

1.2. Procedure

After completing the Year 7 global questionnaire from the NDHWB, participants were invited to participate in the 56-day daily “burst” assessment, which was the wave that included a measure of daily coping strategies in relation to daily stress. Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire at the end of each day. Participants received a total of \$80 in \$10 increments in exchange for mailing back each week of daily questionnaires. Because there were 371 participants and 56 days in the diary burst, 20,776 days of data were possible. Participants only rated their coping strategies on days that they endorsed a bothersome event; this occurred on 11,202 (54%) of the days.

1.3. Measures

1.3.1. Daily coping instrument (DCI)

The perceived severity of the encountered stressor, perceived controllability of the encountered stressor, and functional coping strategies were assessed with the DCI (Stone & Neale, 1984). The participants ranked the most bothersome event they experienced that day in terms of severity and controllability on a scale of 1–10 with 10 being most stressful or most controllable (see Supplemental Table 1 for the types and percentages of stressors endorsed). They marked which coping categories they utilized to deal with the bothersome event. The coping categories differed slightly from Stone and Neale's original measure in that they included examples and modified wording to increase clarity for use in an older population. A factor analysis (see Supplemental Table 2 for details) revealed that three factors were present in the data, illustrative of Pearlman and Schooler's (1978) coping functions of 1) Resituating, 2) Meaning-making of stress, and 3) dispelling the negative effects of stress. *Resituating* included one item scored 0 if not endorsed or 1 if endorsed (“I accepted the issue for what it was and moved on with my day”). *Meaning-making* included three items scored 0 to 3 depending on how many of the items the participant endorsed: talking to a trusted person, gathering information about the issue, or reframing the issue. *Dispelling* included three items similarly scored 0 to 3: distracting oneself, engaging in physical activity, or doing something relaxing. A Durbin-Watson test revealed that the lag-1 autocorrelation was 0.05 for Resituating ($d = 1.90$), 0.10 for Meaning-making ($d = 1.79$), and 0.09 for Dispelling ($d = 1.82$).

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