

Coping strategies in the workplace: Relationships with attributional style and job satisfaction [☆]

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Abstract

This paper examined the relationships between workplace coping strategies, occupational attributional style, and job satisfaction among a sample of 190 nurses employed with a Veterans Affairs Medical Center. As an occupational group, nurses experience high levels of chronic workplace stressors. Participants completed a questionnaire packet containing the Brief COPE, the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ)-Short Form, and the Occupational Attributional Styles Questionnaire (OASQ). Results indicated that a positive occupational attributional style was associated with greater use of problem solving/cognitive restructuring coping styles and less use of avoidance coping styles to deal with workplace stress. This pattern of coping strategies was also associated with greater job satisfaction. Further analyses indicated that the relationship between occupational attributional style and job satisfaction was mediated by the use of problem solving/cognitive restructuring, and avoidance coping strategies to deal with workplace stress. Implications for workplace interventions and work adjustment counseling are discussed.
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1. Introduction

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999) reported that between 26% and 40% of surveyed workers in the United States consider their jobs to be very stressful. Occupational stress produces negative consequences for workers, such as high health care costs (Goetzel et al., 1998) and increased risk for depression and anxiety (Corpley, Steptoe, & Joeke, 1999). Additionally, it can have a detrimental impact on organizations, by increasing rates of absenteeism (Webster & Bergman, 1999) and turnover (Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). Given the prevalence of workplace stress in our society, along with its negative outcomes, it becomes increasingly important to understand the types of strategies that workers use to cope with these pressures, as well as the determinants and outcomes of workplace coping strategies.

In the current work, we examine the antecedents and consequences of various workplace coping strategies among a sample of nurses at a large, southwestern Veterans Affairs Medical Center (VAMC). Nursing is a particularly relevant population for examining these research questions, as healthcare workers have been identified as being at increased risk for occupational stress (Dowd & Bolus, 1998; Flannery, Hanson, Penk, Flannery, & Gallagher, 1995). In particular, nurses are shown to experience multiple, chronic workplace stressors.

In this study, we examine individual differences in the use of problem solving, positive cognitive restructuring, avoidance, and support seeking coping strategies in the workplace, and assess whether these strategies relate to levels of job satisfaction. We suggest: (1) that the choice to use certain coping strategies over others stems from individual differences in *occupational attributional style*, or ways in which positive and negative events at work are interpreted and explained, and (2) that coping strategies contribute to levels of job satisfaction. Further, we suggest that the relationship between occupational attributional style and job satisfaction is mediated by the use of coping strategies in the workplace. Understanding how coping relates to these variables may provide an important first step in the development of more effective workplace stress intervention programs and can inform counseling for work adjustment.

1.1. Attributional styles and coping

The way one chooses to respond to or cope with a stressful situation may be influenced by one's interpretation and explanation of that event. Past work suggests that individuals have stable dispositional tendencies to use positive or negative attributional, or explanatory, styles to interpret and explain the events that occur in their lives (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1979; Peterson et al., 1982). A positive attributional style leads one to view causes of positive events as internal, stable, and global (rather than situation-specific), and causes of negative events as external, temporary, and situation-specific. The opposite explanatory pattern occurs for a negative attributional style: positive events are viewed as being caused by external, unstable, and situation-specific factors; while negative events are seen as stemming from internal, stable, and global factors. A negative attributional style has been associated with depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1992; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986), physical symptoms, poorer physical health, and even mortality (Peterson, Seligman, & Valliant, 1988).

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