Coping Strategies for Overcoming Stress in Atypical Situations

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Abstract: The article analyzes the specifics of coping strategies for overcoming stress used by people who perceive the atypical situations of forced isolation, including the COVID-19 pandemic, in a different way. An empirical study conducted with the use of corresponding psychodiagnostic techniques (Extended Life orientation test; SACS) found that people who are optimistic about restrictions and atypical life situations are prone to use assertive actions and enter into social contacts. Whereas people who are pessimistic about the future have a less pronounced tendency to seek social support. The study confirmed that proactive coping in atypical life situations (including forced isolation) is associated with the relevant individual psychological characteristics, which are important for motivating social activities. Such personality expressions can contribute to the implementation of proactive coping and they are key factors in the pre-actional phase of goal-setting because proactive people focus not on the obstacles, but on solving problems. It is also suggested that proactive instructions can be a resource that enhances an individual's desire for a higher standard of living.

Keywords: *coping strategies; overcoming stress; forced isolation; quarantine measures; optimism; pessimism; proactive coping.*

1. Introduction

Human is a social being. Therefore, any long-term isolation from friends, family, professional community, etc. becomes a cause of deprivation (restriction or prevention from the opportunities to meet vital needs). Any isolation of a person is a reason for stress. Isolation during quarantine is one of the isolation types that can cause various types of deprivation - sensory, motor, mental, informational, emotional, sexual, etc.

A person in isolation either copes with the requirements of the environment, or suffers from various adaptive disorders from short-term depressive reaction to severe disorders of emotions and behavior (Aleksandrov et al., 2017; Ding, & Kalashnyk, 2020). To a large extent, the way of dealing with quarantine depends on how a person perceives what is happening (optimistically or pessimistically). That is why the hypothesis of our empirical study was the assumption that the peculiarities of the strategies for overcoming stress that a person experiences in atypical situations, primarily quarantine isolation, are largely determined by a person's attitude to forced restrictions, namely the individual's orientation on accepting current situation and the active transformation of a negative experience into a positive one, or vice versa.

2. Literature Review

The term "optimism" has emerged relatively recently, as has the related term "pessimism". Considering optimism and pessimism as individual psychological characteristics, Peterson notes that modern ideas about these phenomena have been significantly influenced by many approaches and theories, among which field theory (K. Levin) and the theory of personality constructs (J. Kelly) have the most important role. These theories provided the basis for modern ideas about the way how both optimistic and pessimistic expectations guide human behavior (Peterson, 2000). This position may justify a particular strategy of behavior chosen by the individual in atypical situations of his life in some way.

Coping strategies are actions that allow a person to overcome a difficult life situation on the basis of the personal resources actualization and taking into account the conditions and environment in which it occurs. In addition, it can be argued that this kind of behavior is expressed in the individual's readiness to solve any life problems, difficult situations, complex tasks, etc.

In the conditions of atypical life situations, which include forced isolation, proactive coping, which is defined by some researchers as the

efforts taken before a potentially stressful event in order to prevent or change it before it occurs, becomes relevant (Aspinwall, & Taylor, 1997; Greenglass, 2002). At the same time, Schwarzer and Taubert (2002) consider proactive coping as a method of assessing future goals and creating the conditions for their successful achievement. Taking account of these positions, it can be noted that proactive coping is characterized primarily by the resources accumulation and the acquisition of skills that are designed to resist any stressor, including dealing with atypical life situations during the quarantine. Therefore, **the aim** of the work is to analyze the peculiarities of the strategies, which are the response of the individual to stress in atypical situations of forced restrictions.

3. Methodology

The choice of psychodiagnostic techniques is conditioned by the need for a comprehensive study of people's attitudes to atypical life situations, as well as strategies and models of coping behavior for the implementation of empirical research. Taking into account the diversity of personality expressions, the tools of empirical study involved:

1) Extended Life Orientation Test (ELOT) by Chang in the adaptation of Zamyshlyayeva (**Kryukova, & Zamyshlyayeva, 2007**), aimed to determine a person's predominantly optimistic or pessimistic attitude to life events (including atypical ones).

2) Hobfoll's Strategic Approach to Coping Scale (SACS), adapted by N. Vodopyanova and O. Starchenkova (2009), designed to determine the degree of predominance of certain coping behavior in a difficult (stressful) situation. The questionnaire contains 54 statements, which are divided into 9 scales: "Assertive actions", "Social contacts", "Search for social support", "Cautious actions", "Impulsive actions", "Avoidance", "Indirect actions", "Asocial actions", "Aggressive actions".

The empirical basis of the study consisted of 2 groups of subjects provided with psychological assistance from December 2019 to February 2020. The first group consisted of 327 optimistic individuals; the second group included 309 subjects who had demonstrated a pessimistic attitude towards atypical and complex life situations. The processing and interpretation of the results were carried out at the Department of Sociology and Psychology of Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs (Kharkiv, Ukraine) and the Department of Legal Psychology of National Academy of Internal Affairs (Kyiv, Ukraine).

The study was performed in accordance with the requirements and provisions of the Ethics Code of Kharkiv National University of Internal Affairs (Protocol No. 13 of 24 December 2019). Informed consent was obtained from all participants who during the scientific process were guided by the principles of academic integrity, accountability, ethical norms, and rules required by law to establish confidence in the results of creative achievements. They were able to refuse participation in the study at any time.

4. Results

The research results of the coping strategies of optimistic and pessimistic respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The indicators of coping strategies of optimistic and pessimistic respondents (Mean±SD)

The scales	First group (optimists)	Second group (pessimists)	t	p_{1-2}
Assertive actions	21.35±0.71	17.98±0.84	3.06	≤0.01
Social contact	22.55±0.78	19.14±0.91	2.85	≤0.05
Search for social support	22.29±0.74	17.81±0.59	4.73	≤0.001
Cautious actions	18.31±0.94	17.39±1.09	0.64	-
Impulsive actions	14.15±0.88	15.12±0,61	0.91	-
Avoidance	16.01±0.79	16.69±0.46	0.74	-
Manipulative actions	17.79±0.98	16.81±0.95	0.72	-
Asocial actions	12.09±1.07	13.77±0.86	1.22	-
Aggressive actions	12.91±0.66	13.18±0.70	0.26	-

Legend: Mean – arithmetical average; SD – standard deviation; t – meaning of t-test; p_{1-2} – significance of difference between the indicators of the first and the second groups
Source: N. Vodopyanova and O. Starchenkova (2009)

As it was established, the indicators on the scale "Assertive actions" in the second group (17.98±0.84) were lower than the indicators in the first group authentically (21.35±0.71), t=3.06. The identified differences allowed characterizing the subjects of the first group as more inclined to defend their interests actively and consistently, to declare their goals and intentions, respecting the interests of others. It was determined that the indicators on the scale "Social contacts" in the first group (22.55±0.78) were higher than the indicators in the second group authentically (19.14±0.91), t = 2.85. Thus, the representatives of the first group were characterized by a greater

propensity for social contacts necessary for a joint resolution of critical situations. A comparative analysis of the results obtained on the scale "Search for social support" showed that optimists' indicators (22.29±0.74) on this scale were higher in comparison with pessimists' (17.81±0.59) authentically (t = 4.73). Hence, it can be argued that the respondents of the first group had a greater tendency to seek social support and the desire to share their experiences with other people, discuss their condition with them, find compassion and understanding, etc. No authentic differences were found between the groups on the following scales: "Cautious actions", "Impulsive actions", "Avoidance", "Manipulative actions", "Asocial actions", and "Aggressive actions".

The obtained indicators show that the respondents of both groups are characterized in a similar way in terms of the following coping strategies:

- cautious actions, which are expressed in the desire to avoid risk, to prepare for a long time before acting, to think for some time and consider carefully all possible solutions (at the edge of low and medium levels);

- impulsive actions, which are reflected in the actions at the first impulse under the influence of external circumstances or emotions without prior consideration of actions (the upper limit of the low level);

- avoidance, which implies a tendency to avoid decisive actions and seek to move away from the conflict situation (the middle level);

- manipulative actions, the content of which is behavior that makes it possible to motivate intentionally and covertly another person to experience certain states, make decisions and perform actions necessary to achieve the goal (on the verge of low and medium levels);

- asocial actions, the characteristic features of which are going beyond socially acceptable limits, egocentrism, the desire to satisfy one's own desires without taking into account the circumstances and interests of others (a low level);

- aggressive actions, which are reflected in directing aggressive actions to others in case of failure or conflict with them, feelings of anger, internal tension, frustration, dissatisfaction (the upper limit of the low level).

5. Limits and Discussion

The empirical study confirmed the ideas of **Nartova-Bochaver** (1995) that the psychological purpose of coping is to enable a person to master the situation, weaken its requirements, and thus relieve the stress. Coping strategies as an individual way of interacting with a situation are often viewed by researchers in the context of viability (**Biron, 2014**). Hence,

the attitudes will set the specifics of the individual's coping response to stress, and this will apply not only to atypical life situations, intense experiences but also to the events of everyday stress.

In addition, Greenglass (2002) prefers proactive coping as a means of overcoming difficulties, which is multifaceted and combines the processes of the personal management of living standards with self-regulation to achieve the goal. This opinion is confirmed by the results of our empirical study. In addition, Biron (2014) states that in the situational and dispositional continuum, the favorable coping strategy has a significant potential for the formation of a personal form of overcoming stress, primarily through special development activities.

At the same time, there are studies that reveal the opposite relationship: proactive coping contains a wide range of phenomena that are expressed independently, such as the study of the situation and reflection, interpretation, explanation, attribution, etc. (Aspinwall, & Taylor, 1997; Shvets, et al., 2020). Thus, proactive coping is not limited to one reaction, which is a response to a negative event, but it is also able to influence the processes of perception that form the meaning of stress experience. These processes can be beneficial, as they can increase emotional self-control, and contribute to positive self-esteem and self-perception of the individual.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the analysis, it was defined that individuals who are optimistic about any restrictions associated with atypical situations (including forced isolation) are more prone to the use of assertive actions and social contact in comparison with pessimists. The latter have a less pronounced tendency to seek social support. In addition, it was found that optimistic people are characterized by a more prominent propensity for reflexive overcoming, combined with preventive overcoming and search for instrumental support in atypical situations. In contrast, pessimists tend to use proactive coping less, but they are more likely to seek emotional support.

The study confirmed that proactive coping in atypical situations is associated with the relevant individual psychological characteristics of the individual, which are important for motivating social activities. Proactive coping has a resource nature, which turns out to be an important "target" in the formative and corrective training. Negative influences on the personality are overridden by personal potential and realized by means of favorable coping in the form of positive results for the personality.

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