UNIT 5 : COPING WITH STRESS*

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to,

- discuss the nature of coping and explain its goals.
- explain coping styles.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Sania was interested in pursuing a career in dance, but her parents insisted that she gets into a professional course. She joined MBA programme to make her parents happy but was not able to keep pace with demands of the programme. She tried her best to study hard but could not get adequate marks in the examination. With the frustration that she experienced as a result of not able to pursue her interest, pressure from her parents and stress she experienced while pursuing the programme took a toll on her, she started feeling irritable and angry all the time. Her relationship with friends was also getting affected. Ultimately, she decided to talk to her parents and convinced them to let her pursue her interest and took admission at a performing arts institute, where she excelled and was well appreciated by her teachers.

Sharan got the promotion that he long waited for and was on top of the world. But with the promotion came immense responsibilities and work overload. As a result of the stress and burnout that he experienced, he started

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making errors and found himself at the end of blames and criticisms. Soon, Sharan started experiencing symptoms of depression and also had suicidal ideation. A day came when he had to be taken to a clinical psychologist for help in coping with his situation.

Above we discussed two examples. On one hand where Sania was effectively able to cope with stress, Sharan found it difficult to cope and had to seek professional help. As a person experiences stress, he/ she will try to cope and will utilise varied coping strategies. These strategies could be effective or ineffective.

In the present unit, we will explain the concept of coping as well as various coping styles.

5.2 DEFINITION AND NATURE OF COPING

Coping in simple terms can be described as ways in which an individual tries to deal with stress experienced by him/ her. And in this context, the individual may be able to deal effectively with stress if he/ she adopts effective coping skills and he/ she may not be able to deal effectively with stress if the coping skills adopted by him/ her are ineffective.

Coping refers to “the individual’s response to a psychological stressor which is often related to a negative event” (Roncaglia, 2014, pg. 137). Coping can also be described as deliberate efforts that are directed towards decreasing the negative effects, that could be psychological, physical or even social, of the stressful situation.

Coping has been defined by Lazarus and Folkman in 1980 as efforts, both cognitive and behavioural, that are directed towards overcoming, decreasing or enduring the internal and external demands. Thus, there is an effort to deal with the demands that are created on the resources of an individual as a result of stress. Coping in this context could be instrumental or palliative. Instrumental coping is denoted by results of cognitive appraisal or conflicts related to emotions. Palliative coping, on the other hand, is denoted by regulation of emotions as a result of cognitive reappraisal of the stressful event or situation. Thus, either the problem is altered or the emotional regulation is carried out during the coping process (Ghosh, 2015).

Matheny et al. (1986) defined coping as conscious or unconscious, healthy or unhealthy effort that is directed towards either prevention or elimination of stressor or to weaken it or be able to endure its effects in a manner that is least harmful.

Haan (1993) explained coping as an effort directed towards using the resources to overcome the difficulties as the obstacles are encountered.

As described by Bartram and Gardner (2008, pg. 228) “Coping is the process of thoughts and behaviours that people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations they appraise as being stressful or exceeding their own resources. Coping efforts seek to manage, master, tolerate, reduce or minimise the demands of a stressful environment”.
From the above definitions it is clear that coping is an effort to deal with a stressor. The coping may aim at dealing with the problem that is the cause of any distress in the individual or to deal with the negative emotions experienced by him/her. Though coping could either be adaptive or maladaptive.

An adaptive coping not only reduces stress but has long term positive effects. Whereas, maladaptive coping may provide respite from stress for a short period of time but it could have negative impact on physical and psychological health of the individual. Some of the maladaptive coping strategies are consumption of alcohol or drugs, smoking, risky behaviours, isolating oneself, being overcritical of oneself and so on.

Individual differences exist in the way individuals cope with stressful situations. Variations could exist based on personality of an individual, his/her tolerance level for stimulation, psychological hardiness, the style of attribution, learned helplessness and his/her sense of coherence. Difference may also exist due to gender (Ghosh, 2015).

Personality not only determines how stress is perceived by an individual but also how he/she reacts and copes with stress. Individuals having varied personalities will display different coping styles and strategies. Similarly people with high or low need for stimulation will also vary in their coping strategies. Persons with low need for stimulation are not able to cope with stress as do people with high need for stimulation (Ghosh, 2015).

Hardiness and resilience also play a role in determining the coping ability of the individuals. Psychological hardiness can be described as an individual’s ability to deal with stressful situations with resilience (Bartone, 1999; Kobasa, 1979). Hardiness can be related with three main aspects, namely, commitment, control and challenge and these can determine the response to stress or coping strategy employed by the individual (Ghosh, 2015).

With reference to the style of attribution, individuals could be optimistic or pessimistic and this can also determine the coping strategy employed by the individuals. Optimistic individuals are likely to cope better with stressful situations when compared with individuals who are pessimistic.

The term learned helplessness was introduced by Seligman. The term is used to “describe the interference with adaptive responding produced by inescapable shock and also as a shorthand to describe the process which we believe underlies the behavior” (Seligman, 1972, pg. 408). The coping process that an individual goes through may differ based on learned helplessness.

Antonovosky, 1987 (as cited in Ghosh, 2015, pg. 169) described sense of coherence as “enduring through dynamic, feeling of confidence that:

(1) The stimuli deriving from ones internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable and explicable,

(2) The resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli, and
Men and women also differ in the way they cope with stress. Women are more likely to employ coping strategies like positive self-talk, seeking support from others, continuously worrying about the stressful event and so on, though they are also more prone to develop learned helplessness. Men on the other hand could engage in maladaptive coping strategies like consumption of alcohol and drugs (Ghosh, 2015). Further, women are more prone to using the coping strategies that target at bringing about change in their emotional reactions to a situation that is stressful and men are more likely to focus on the problem (Endler and Parker, 1990; Matud, 2004; Ptacek et al., 1994). Further, women also experience more psychological distress as well as display symptoms of depression and anxiety when compared with men and this can also be attributed to the coping strategies that are emotion focused that are more frequently used by women when compared with men (Kelly et al, 2008). Coping can also differ or may depend on various external aspects including social support received by the individual.

5.2.1 Goals of Coping
As we now have a clear idea about the meaning and definition of coping, let us now discuss the goals of coping. As was explained earlier, the main goal of coping is dealing with the stressor so that its impact on the individual is minimal. Further, individual differences exist in the coping styles adopted by the persons. Also, different coping strategies may be effective in different situations. Thus, during the coping process either internal resources or external resources are utilized by the individuals (Ghosh, 2015). Some of the major goals of coping are as follows (Ghosh, 2015):

- To enhance the possibility of recovery by decreasing the negative environmental conditions.
- To be able to adjust to the negative situation.
- To maintain a self-image that is positive and maintain emotional balance.
- To ensure positive interpersonal relationship.

Coping is termed as effective when it leads to recovery and when the individual is able to adapt to the stressful situation by means of maintaining a positive image about one’s self, emotional balance and has effective interpersonal relationships. Whether a coping has been effective or not can be assessed based on the results of the coping. For instance, physiological and biochemical changes and functioning can be assessed in order ascertain whether the coping has been adaptive or not. An adaptive coping will lead to regulation of various physiological indicators. Besides the physiological measures, if there is decrease in psychological distress displayed by the individual, then the coping strategy can be termed as adaptive. The duration of time taken by individuals to achieve the same state of functioning before they experienced a negative event (for instance, divorce, job loss and so on) or display of an improved state of functioning than before the negative event was experienced can also be an indicator of successful coping.
Check Your progress 1

1) Define Coping.

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2) State any one goal of coping.

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5.3 COPING STYLES

As the nature of coping is now clear let us focus on the coping styles and strategies. Coping styles can be categorized as proactive coping, avoidant coping, emotion focused coping and problem focused coping. Proactive coping and avoidant coping are based on the method of coping and the emotion focused coping and problem focused coping are based on the focus of the coping. Let us discuss each of these styles in detail.

5.3.1 Proactive coping and avoidant coping

In proactive coping the individual will directly confront the stressful situation or event. An individual adopting this type of coping will take direct action by developing a better idea about the stress creating situation.

There are various stages of proactive coping (Ghosh, 2015):

Stage 1 Accumulation of resources: In order to be able to deal with the stressful situation, the individual will make attempts to accumulate resources, this could also be in terms of gathering information so as to understand the stressful situation in better manner.

Stage 2 Identifying or anticipating the potential stressor: A potential stressor is anticipated or identified by the individual. For instance, if it is expected that one’s superior may ask for a certain report, the employee will anticipate the stressor and start working on the report before hand.

Stage 3 Initial appraisal: Initial appraisal of the stress creating situation is carried out.

Stage 4 Preliminary efforts to cope with the stressful situation: Based on the initial appraisal, preliminary efforts to cope with the stressful situation are carried out. In case these efforts do not show any positive results then, some other action is taken in order to deal with the situation.
**Stage 5 Seeking feedback and using the same:** Based on the stages three and four, feedback is sought and used so that modifications and changes can be carried out.

In avoidant coping, as the name suggests, the individual will try to avoid the stress creating situation or may give less importance to the stressful event. Thus, the behaviour that is displayed by the individual is directed towards avoiding certain thoughts or feelings that could arise due to the stressful situation. Avoidance coping can result in individuals experiencing not only stress and anxiety but it can have an impact on self-confidence of the individual as well (Boyes, 2013). As stated by Holahan et al. (2005) “Avoidance coping involves cognitive and behavioral efforts oriented toward denying, minimising, or otherwise avoiding, dealing directly with stressful demands and is closely linked to distress and depression. In avoidant coping certain behaviours that may stir up negative memories are avoided”. Situations that may stir up negative feelings are also avoided. Individuals who use avoidant coping may not continue pursuing their goal if they experience thoughts that create anxiety (Boyes, 2013).

### 5.3.2 Emotion focused coping and Problem focused coping

Let us look at the example given below:

_Since Sunny was assigned to a new superior, Sunny felt that he has been given more work compared to his colleagues and is also criticised frequently. He is not aware why his superior is doing so, but the work overload and frequent criticisms are taking a toll on him and he feels stressed. He even lost sleep and appetite. Sunny’s friends noticed change in Sunny as he would keep to himself and was not his usual self. Some of his friends decided to speak to him. After understanding the issue, one of them, Kabir, suggested that Sunny should directly speak to his superior or the human resource department. Another friend, Kedar, suggested that he needs to accept and adjust with the situation and try to put in his best._

As you can see in the above example, two of the Sunny’s friends gave two different suggestions. The suggestion given by Kabir is mainly problem focused where the problem is dealt with in a direct manner. Whereas, the suggestion given by Kedar mainly focuses on managing one’s emotions and can be termed emotional coping or emotion focused coping.

Emotion focused coping can be differentiated from problem focused coping as its purpose is to manage emotions that are related with the stressful situation rather than modifying the situation.

Emotion focused coping involves management of the emotional reactions towards the events causing stress. “Emotion-focused coping strategies aim to reduce and manage the intensity of the negative and distressing emotions that a stressful situation has caused rather than solving the problematic situation itself” (Galor, 2012). Thus, this coping is directed towards decreasing any unpleasantness that the person experiences as a result of facing the stressful situation. The avoidant coping style that we discussed earlier could be related with this coping style as it involves avoidance of a situation. Though, this coping style also involves positive reappraisal, where,
positive aspects of the situation are focused on keeping in mind one’s own benefits and growth. Emotion focused coping are often used when change in the stressful situation is not possible and it is also more likely to be used by women than men (Ghosh, 2015). Using emotion focused coping can help in decreasing the negative effects of the stressor on the individual and will help the individual accept the situation and will thus lead to decrease in the experience of chronic stress. It also helps individuals to think with a clear mind and seek a solution to the problem. It may also lead to contentment in life and bring about positivity. This in turn can lead to enhancement of one’s ability to focus on aspects that can be modified or changed. Some of the strategies of emotion focused coping include, listening to music, maintaining a diary, meditation, exercise and so on.

Some of the drawbacks of this coping are that it may not be as effective, as the source of the stress is not dealt with, and, as such no long term solution is sought.

Problem focused coping involves identifying the source of the problem so as to either deal with it or modify it. The proactive coping that we discussed earlier can be closely related with this type of coping. Further, problem focused coping also involves taking control of the stressful situation, seeking information about it and evaluation of positive and negative aspects in a situation (Roncaglia, 2014). In problem focused coping the first step involved is identification of the problem so that the source of stress is clear. And this is important as this coping style can be effective only when there is clarity with regard to the problem. For instance, problem focused coping works well while coping with examinations, interviews, making presentations and so on where one knows what the source of stress is and also stress caused due to such situations can be controlled by the individual. Though, if the source of stress is based on emotions then it is better to use emotion focused coping rather than problem focused coping. For instance, while dealing with loss of a loved one, divorce or breakup and so on. Further, in this style, the obstacles that may arise in the process of dealing with the stressful situation need to be avoided and the focus should be on problem. For instance, if a person has an interview, but could not prepare for it due to paucity of time, he/she has no other choice but face the interview and do his/her best. In this case the paucity of time could be termed as a roadblock that need not be focused on as time has already passed and nothing can be done about it. The main limitations of this coping style are that it may not be effective in every stressful situation and as such may not be suitable for all the individuals. Though it is often effective in dealing with stressors and useful in long run.

Various strategies involved in problem solving coping include, management of time, seeking support, seeking help from others, planning and so on.

Yet another coping style was proposed by Carver and Connor-Smith in 2010. It is called appraisal- focussed coping. In this coping style, the assumptions of an individual with regard to his/her perceptions of the stressor are challenged by the means of a cognitive reappraisal (Roncaglia, 2014).

Coping can also be categorised as combative coping and preventive coping as stated by Folkman et al. (Ghosh, 2015). In combative coping, in order
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to deal with the stressor, the individual makes an attempt to remove the stressor by overcoming it. Combative coping involves monitoring of stress, resource accumulation, dealing with the stressor by attacking it directly, tolerance of stress, and decreasing arousal (Ghosh, 2015).

In preventive coping, cognitive restructuring takes place so that the stressor is not threatening any more. Further, one’s own potential for resistance is also strengthened so that the stressor can be prevented from occurring. Preventive coping includes adjustments so that the stressors can be avoided. Also demand levels are adjusted, behaviour patterns that lead to stress are modified and coping resources (physiological, psychological, financial and so on) are developed (Ghosh, 2015).

Check Your Progress II

1) List the stages of proactive coping.

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2) What is problem focused coping?

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5.4 LET US SUM UP

In the present Unit, we discussed the definition and nature of coping with stress and the coping styles. Coping in simple terms can be described as ways in which an individual tries to deal with stress experienced by him/her. Coping can also be described as deliberate efforts that are directed towards decreasing the negative effects, that could be psychological, physical or even social, of the stressful situation. Coping could either be adaptive or maladaptive. An adaptive coping style not only reduces stress but has long term effects. Whereas, maladaptive coping may provide respite from stress for a short period of time but it could have negative impacts on physical and psychological health of the individual. Individual differences exist in the way individuals cope with stressful situations. Variations could exist based on personality of individuals, his/her tolerance level for stimulation, psychological hardiness, the style of attribution, learned helplessness and his/her sense of coherence. Difference may also exist due to gender. The goals of coping were also discussed in this Unit and some of the major goals of coping include enhancing the possibility of recovery by decreasing
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the negative environmental conditions, being able to adjust to the negative situation, maintaining a self-image that is positive and emotional balance and ensuring positive interpersonal relationships. Coping is termed as effective when it leads to recovery and when the individual is able to adapt to the stressful situation by means of maintaining a positive image about one’s self, emotional balance and has effective interpersonal relationship.

Coping styles can be categories as proactive coping, avoidant coping, emotion focused coping and problem focused coping. Proactive coping and avoidant coping are based on the method of coping and the emotion focused coping and problem focused coping are based on the focus of the coping. In proactive coping the individual will directly confront the stressful situation or event. An individual adopting this type of coping will take direct action by developing a better idea about the stress creating situation. In avoidant coping style, the individual will try to avoid the stress creating situation or may give less importance to the stressful event. Emotion focused coping involves management of the emotional reactions towards the events causing stress and problem focused coping style involves identifying the source of the problem so as to either deal with it or modify it. Emotion focused coping can be differentiated from the problem focused coping as its purpose is to manage emotions that are related with the stressful situation rather than modifying the situation.

In the next Unit we will discuss about various stress management techniques.

5.5 REFERENCES


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5.6 KEY WORDS

Coping: Coping in simple terms can be described as ways in which an individual tries to deal with stress experienced by him/her.

Avoidant coping: In avoidant coping, as the name suggests, the individual will try to avoid the stress creating situation or may give less importance to the stressful event.
**Emotion focused coping:** Emotion focused coping involves management of the emotional reactions towards the events causing stress.

**Proactive coping:** In proactive coping the individual will directly confront the stressful situation or event. An individual adopting this type of coping will take direct action by developing a better idea about the stress creating situation.

**Problem focused coping:** Problem focused coping involves identifying the source of the problem so as to either deal with it or modify it.

### 5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your progress I**

1) Define Coping.

Lazarus and Folkman in 1980 defined coping as efforts, both cognitive and behavioural, that are directed towards overcoming, decreasing or enduring the internal and external demands.

2) State any one goal of coping.

One of the goals of coping is to enhance the possibility of recovery by decreasing the negative environmental conditions.

**Check Your Progress II**

1) List the stages of proactive coping.

The stages of proactive coping are as follows:

- Stage 1 Accumulation of resources
- Stage 2 Identifying or anticipating the potential stressor
- Stage 3 Initial appraisal
- Stage 4 Preliminary efforts to cope with the stressful situation
- Stage 5 Seeking feedback and using the same

2) What is problem focused coping?

Problem focused coping style involves identifying the source of the problem so as to either deal with it or modify it.

### 5.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Define coping and discuss its goals.
2) Explain the nature of coping.
3) Describe the steps involved in proactive coping.
4) Discuss proactive and avoidant coping styles.
5) Describe emotion focused and problem focused coping.