

Abstract

Research on coping in old age suggests enormous variability in the ways elderly people deal with taxing situations. Transactionally-oriented coping researchers (Lazarus, 1991) propose that coping is a process explanation for individual differences in stress outcomes, its course suggested to be extremely variable, and largely determined by situational demands. Personality research, on the other hand, suggests that stable dispositions in part explain interindividual differences in stress outcomes. In an effort to combine the two approaches, the present study was concerned with the proposedly more stable side of different aspects of coping in older age. Specifically, the interplay between higher-order personality characteristics (i.e., Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness) and different aspects of coping (situation-specific, dispositional, content, and content-free) with regard to the adaptation to a stressful situation and its consequences were closely examined.

One hundred and ten cataract patients (ages 43 to 89 years) were tested at four measurement points in time during a six- to seven-week period surrounding their scheduled surgery. Personality traits and situation-specific coping were measured once upon admission to the hospital (t1). Dispositionally instructed coping was measured once at six weeks post-surgery (t4). Short- (affect and coping satisfaction) and longer-term outcomes (emotional and functional adaptation) were assessed repeatedly throughout the six- to seven-week period surrounding surgery.

Findings pointed to *dispositionally assessed coping* as an "epiphenomenon of personality" (McCrae & Costa, 1986), that is, it no longer explained independent variance of longer-term outcomes once higher-order personality traits were controlled. On the other hand, *situation-specific coping* acquired a mediator status (Bolger, 1990) between personality and short-term adaptational criteria. A moderating role of coping was rarely found. More content-free aspects of coping (i.e., selectivity and total range of coping) appeared to be predicted differentially by higher-order personality traits and in turn seemed to predict differentially how participants adapted emotionally and functionally to the situation and its more distal consequences. Potential explanations for an evident lack of cross-sectional relations between coping and age are discussed at length.