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To my Father and Mother

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Foreword

I am very pleased to have been asked to do a brief foreword to this second CRISP volume, *The Social Context of Coping*. I know most of the participants and their work, and respect them as first-rate and influential research scholars whose research is at the cusp of current concerns in the field of stress and coping.

Psychological stress is central to human adaptation. It is difficult to visualize the study of adaptation, health, illness, personal soundness, and psychopathology without recognizing their dependence on how well people cope with the stresses of living. Since the editor, John Eckenrode, has portrayed the themes of each of the chapters in his introduction, I can limit myself to a few general comments about stress and coping.

Stress research began, as unexplored fields often do, with very simple—should I say simplistic?—ideas about how to define the concept. Early approaches were unidimensional and input–output in outlook, modeled implicitly on Hooke’s late-17th-century engineering analysis in which external load was an environmental stressor, stress was the area over which the load acted, and strain was the deformation of the structure such as a bridge or building.

The analogy between the capacity of a metal to resist strain—Hooke was interested in the elasticity of metals—and a person’s capacity to resist psychophysiological damage under load has always been a tempting one for social scientists. Current research on resistance resources, social support, constructive thinking, hardiness, learned resourcefulness, dispositional optimism, self-efficacy, and sense of mastery—to name some of the fashionable personality and social mediators of stress effects—reflects the productive power of this analogy.

However, though the analogy might provide a good starting point for framing the question of what provokes resiliency, when this physical

analogy is taken too literally as explanation, certain key psychological processes that are needed for a thorough comprehension of psychological stress and the emotions that flow from it—e.g., grasping the personal significance of the person–environment relationship; responding to feedback about the flow of events; and managing demands, constraints, and opportunities—are left out. The participants in this volume understand this very well.

In light of this, as interest in psychological stress increased, so did the complexity of its conceptualization, leading to a greater focus on individual differences in motivation and cognition as mediators of the person–environment relationship. Most researchers now take for granted that the appraisal of harm/loss, threat, and challenge—and coping too—has a powerful role in the response to stressful encounters, and that we need to know more about the social and personality factors that shape the appraisal process. These factors are now central variables and processes in stress theory, research, and measurement.

As a serious target for theory and research, the concept of coping itself began to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s and really blossomed in the 1980s. There were and still are challenges about how to think about coping—for example, whether it is best regarded as a stable trait, a contextual process, or both; the social and personal factors that influence it; how it affects adaptational outcomes; and the interventions one might use to change it for the better. These topics come up frequently in this book, and the research and ideas reported in *The Social Context of Coping* advance our thinking about them substantially.

A principle of coping that had previously been ignored—namely, that what a person wants to accomplish in a stressful transaction underlies the choice of coping strategy—has also begun to appear in some of the chapters, and I would like to take brief notice of it. In stressful transactions between a parent and child, spouses and lovers, co-workers, and so on, I am convinced that the coping process depends, to a substantial degree, on intentions toward the other person in the relationship and toward the relationship itself. In an anger encounter, for example, if a person wants to preserve the relationship, the coping strategy is more likely to involve suppression of the anger than if that person wants to repair a damaged self-esteem; in the latter case, the coping strategy is more likely to involve escalation of the anger and efforts to malign the other. So in addition to social and personality variables, situational goals or intentions also play a role in shaping coping.

This book deals with many of the most important issues on which an understanding of stress, coping, and adaptation is predicated, and it

should become an important resource for a wide range of researchers, scholars, and professionals.

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Preface

This book represents the second volume of contributions by members of the Consortium for Research Involving Stress Processes (CRISP) and their colleagues. The first volume, entitled *Stress between Work and Family* (1990), appeared as an earlier book in this series. The consortium was founded in 1983 with the support of the William T. Grant Foundation and has been meeting twice a year since that time. Interdisciplinary in nature, the consortium's mission is to increase communication and collaboration among researchers who represent various disciplines and to provide a forum for the articulation of unresolved issues in the field. Therefore, this volume represents not only the efforts of each of the authors of these chapters but also reflects discussions that have taken place in the consortium meetings. All the chapters deal with issues of stress and coping from a variety of perspectives, but two concepts link the chapters to each other: context and process. Attention to context serves to expand the topic of coping beyond an overly narrow concern with the individual's adaptational efforts. A focus on process reinforces the dynamic nature of the stress and coping process.

Many people made this volume possible in addition to the authors of the following chapters. I would especially like to acknowledge the support of Robert Haggerty, president of the William T. Grant Foundation, whose vision, guidance, and patience made our consortium possible. Linda Pickett and Frank Kessel, representing the Grant Foundation at our meetings, were a continuing source of encouragement. Finally, I would like to thank those consortium members who provided valuable feedback on the chapters presented here, but who do not themselves appear as authors in this volume. These include Blair Wheaton, Camille Wortman, Robert Weiss, Joan Liem, Ramsay Liem, and Patricia Cohen.

JOHN ECKENRODE

Ithaca, New York

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction and Overview	1
<i>John Eckenrode</i>	
Introduction	1
The Social Context of Coping	4
Organization of the Volume	7
References	10
 Chapter 2. Situations and Processes of Coping	 13
<i>Elaine Wethington and Ronald C. Kessler</i>	
Situational Determinants of Coping and Coping Effectiveness ..	15
Distress, Disorder, and Coping	21
Social Interaction and “Individual” Coping	24
Summary and Conclusion	27
References	28
 Chapter 3. Children and Divorce: Stress and Coping in Developmental Perspective	 31
<i>Donald Wertlieb</i>	
Introduction	31
Sirens of History	32
The Psychopathological Bias	33
The Context Bias	34
The Transactional Challenge	35
The Heterogeneity Challenge	36

Reconceptualizing Divorce	37
Event versus Events	37
Events versus Experiences	38
Advancing with Stress and Coping Models	40
Differentiating Stress and Coping	40
Developmental Orchestration	44
Issues in Mental Health Intervention	47
References	50

**Chapter 4. Development, Stress, and Role Restructuring:
Social Transitions of Adolescence** 55

Carol S. Aneshensel and Susan Gore

Developmental Issues	56
Normative and Nonnormative Stressors	58
The Qualitative Interviews	63
Dating Transitions and Role Restructuring	65
School Transitions and Role Restructuring	69
Discussion	72
References	75

**Chapter 5. Age Differences in Workers' Efforts
to Cope with Economic Distress** 79

Karen Rook, David Dooley, and Ralph Catalano

Theoretical Perspectives on Life Course Variations in Coping Skills	80
Decline in Coping Skills across the Life Course	81
Improvement in Coping Skills across the Life Course	82
Stable Coping Skills across the Life Course	83
Empirical Work on Life Course Variations in Coping	84
Studies That Have Found Age Differences in Coping	84
Studies That Have Not Found Age Differences	86
Summary	87
Age Differences in Coping with Economic Distress:	
Evidence from a Metropolitan Sample	88
The Sample	89
Measures of Economic Distress, Coping, and Psychological Functioning	90
Results	94
Discussion of Findings	97

Conclusion	99
Implications for Intervention	100
References	102

Chapter 6. Gender Differences in Coping with Emotional Distress

107

Peggy A. Thoits

Gender Differences in Coping	108
Methods	112
Procedures	112
The Sample	112
Coding Procedures	113
Negative Events	113
Perceptions of Events	116
Coping Strategies	116
Outcomes	117
Results	118
Gender Differences in Coping Strategies	118
Gender Differences in Event Perceptions	120
Event Perceptions and Coping	122
Outcomes	123
Discussion and Conclusions	128
References	131

Chapter 7. Gender, Stress, and Distress: Social–Relational Influences

139

Susan Gore and Mary Ellen Colten

Gender Differences in Depression, Distress, and Exposure to Stress	141
Differential Vulnerability to Stress: Social Support, Personality, and Coping	145
Social Relationships, Social Support, and Self-Esteem in Exposure and Vulnerability to Stress	149
Interpersonal Dimensions to Self-Esteem, Stress, and Coping	149
Problems in Social Support Research	152
Toward Integrating Stress and Gender Research	157
References	158

**Chapter 8. Stress and Support Processes
in Close Relationships 165**

Benjamin H. Gottlieb and Fred Wagner

Introduction	165
Interpersonal Contingencies Affecting the Expression of Support	166
Summary	171
A Study of Interspousal Influences and Impacts on Coping	172
Selected Findings	174
Discussion	181
Conclusion	186
References	187

**Chapter 9. Effects of Depression on Social Support
in a Community Sample of Women 189**

Mary Amanda Dew and Evelyn J. Bromet

Introduction	189
Method	192
Subjects	192
Procedure	193
Measures	193
Analyses	195
Results	196
Descriptive Data	196
Relationship of Depression to Follow-Up Support, Controlling for Baseline Support	198
Relationship of Characteristics of Depressive Episode to Follow-Up Support	201
Discussion	204
Conclusions	208
References	209

**Chapter 10. Marital Engagement/Disengagement,
Social Networks, and Mental Health 213**

Nan Lin and Jeanne Westcott

Introduction	213
The Theory	215

Marriage and Integration of Social Networks	218
Gender Role Differences in the Networks	226
Marital Disengagement and Breakup of Network and Support	227
Reformulation of Social Network and Support	229
The Cyclic Process of Marital Engagement/Disengagement	232
Summary	233
References	235

Chapter 11. Translating Coping Theory into an Intervention

239

*Susan Folkman, Margaret Chesney, Leon McKusick, Gail Ironson,
David S. Johnson, and Thomas J. Coates*

Background	240
Cognitive Appraisal	241
Coping	242
Reappraisal	245
Effective Coping	245
Social Aspects of Coping	248
Coping Effectiveness Training: A Brief Intervention	250
Appraisal Training	251
Coping Training	252
Social Support Training	253
Empirical Support for the Intervention Model	254
Subjects	255
Methods	255
Results	256
Potential Applications of the Intervention Model	256
References	257

Chapter 12. The Study of Coping: An Overview of Problems and Directions

261

Leonard I. Pearlin

Introduction	261
Unobserved Stressors and the Assessment of Coping	263
Equivalent Stressors, Nonequivalent Meanings	264
Conceptual and Methodological Issues in the Study of Coping	267

Naturalistic and Planned Interventions 271

Discussion 274

References 275

Index 277