Coping with Work and Nonwork Demands

Kelly Wilson
Purdue University

How do you cope with various demands in your work and nonwork spaces? Research outlines multiple adaptive coping strategies individuals utilize to successfully manage stressful demands, including:

- Planning: thinking about how to cope with a stressor and creating a plan of action (e.g., developing action strategies, thinking about what steps to take).
- Prioritizing: concentrating fully on the challenge at hand and suppressing other activities (e.g., putting other projects aside).
- Positive reframing: construing or reappraising a stressor in positive terms.
- Seeking emotional support: seeking moral support, sympathy, or understanding from others.
- Seeking instrumental support: seeking advice, assistance, or information from others.

CONTACT
kellysw@purdue.edu

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Previous research mainly focuses on coping with a demand from one specific role (e.g., from one's work or family) and examines each coping strategy separately. However, recent research is starting to examine coping "profiles" or whether people use several coping strategies in combination to manage a specific stressor. These studies generally find that coping at higher levels of adaptive coping strategies is better for one's engagement (e.g., higher energy and absorption in one's work) and coping at moderate to low levels of multiple coping strategies is worse for well-being (e.g., higher stress, depression and anxiety). Building upon this work, my coauthors (Catherine Kleshinski, Julia Stevenson-Street, Lindsay Mechem Rosokha) and I conducted three studies to examine how individuals cope with demands that impact both their work and nonwork domains (e.g., caring for a sick child or helping a friend in need during the workday) and whether individuals engage in more than one strategy simultaneously.

Study #1

Study 1 was conducted with university employees at two time points during the COVID-19 pandemic. Time 1 occurred during lockdown (April 2020) and three coping profiles emerged. These profiles included: individualistic copers (individuals who engaged in high levels of planning, prioritizing and positive reframing, and lower levels of seeking support from others), emotion-focused copers (higher use of seeking emotional support and positive reframing, and lower use of planning, prioritizing and seeking instrumental support), and comprehensive copers (individuals who engaged in high levels of all five coping strategies – high planning, prioritizing, positive reframing, and seeking instrumental and emotional support). At Time 2 (when lockdown restrictions were being lifted and our sample returned to at least some in-person work in September 2020), four profiles emerged including the same three from Time 1, plus "surviving" copers. Surviving copers are characterized by moderate levels of the five coping strategies.

Overall, in Study 1 we found that individuals who remain individualistic copers throughout the study (i.e., individuals who do not seek emotional or instrumental support at Time 1 and Time 2) experienced the lowest work and well-being outcomes (e.g., lower thriving, task adaptability, and higher stress), while those who coped in at least one affiliative way – pursued emotional or instrumental support – experienced healthier outcomes. We also found that those who were comprehensive copers during the entire study (i.e., engaged in high levels of all five coping strategies at Time 1 and Time 2) experienced higher stress. This suggests that coping at full capacity over time taxes our personal resources and the best approach may be to efficiently cope by engaging in at least one form of support seeking (emotional or instrumental) and one other strategy (e.g., planning).

Study #2

Study 2 was conducted across three time points in late 2022 with a sample of full-time working adults from various industries. This study replicated the majority of our coping profiles from the pandemic, except emotion-focused copers, and also uncovered one new profile. The four profiles that emerged include: individualistic copers, comprehensive copers, surviving copers, and low copers. The new profile, low copers, includes individuals who engage in low levels of all five coping strategies (low planning, prioritizing, positive reframing, and seeking instrumental and emotional support).

Study #3

Study 3, which was conducted in early 2023 with a sample of full-time working adults at two time points, demonstrated the same four profiles as Study 2 (individualistic copers, comprehensive copers, surviving copers, and low copers). Preliminary results suggest that individuals who transition into survivors (i.e., those who use moderate levels of all five coping strategies at Time 2) experience less task adaptability at work, as well as lower thriving at work and lower recovery at home.

Expert tips

Taken altogether, it appears crucial to find the right mix of coping strategies, which leads to these recommendations:

Tip #1: Build connections with others who are good listeners and helpers.

Tip #2: Seek guidance and support from one of these connections when facing demands that stem from your work and nonwork roles or responsibilities.

Tip #3: Using too many coping strategies appears to overtax or deplete personal resources. Carefully decide on a couple coping strategies to focus on given the work and nonwork stressors you are facing.