
Fostering adolescents' coping skills — An action approach

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ABSTRACT

Following a description of differences between the more common approaches to coping skills acquisition and an action theory approach, the potential implementation of action theory with people who experience transitional states is discussed. Specifically, adolescents in Israel are confronted by making the transition to military life following secondary school. It is suggested that action theory offers a comprehensive strategy for counselling persons who are confronting a stressful episode in life through a more detailed and socially embedded collaboration between the counsellor, the person (client), and peers. By doing so, the benefits of other common approaches to coping skills acquisition are gained, along with an enriched and expanded program for counselling people (adolescents) who are facing stressful life events.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit d'abord les différences entre les démarches les plus courantes reliées à l'acquisition d'habiletés d'adaptation et une approche fondée sur la théorie de l'action. Il examine ensuite l'application éventuelle de la théorie de l'action pour les personnes traversant des périodes de transition. Plus particulièrement, l'auteur s'intéresse aux transitions chez les adolescents israéliens entre l'école secondaire et la vie militaire. Selon lui, la théorie de l'action offre aux conseillers de personnes devant faire face à un épisode stressant de leur vie une stratégie globale de counseling axée sur une collaboration plus approfondie et plus étroite entre le conseiller, le client et les pairs de ce dernier. La théorie de l'action permet de profiter des autres méthodes courantes d'acquisition d'habiletés d'adaptation; en même temps, cette théorie offre un programme élargi et enrichi de counseling pour les adolescents aux prises avec des événements stressants de la vie.

During their adolescence (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), young people are exposed to a variety of stressful events. While some of these events are very rare, others are both common and inevitable, like school entrance and/or school-to-work transition. It is now widely accepted that adolescents who are lacking coping skills might fail to manage well in their daily life (Frydenberg, 1999; Sorensen, 1993) or even suffer a major negative impact on their health and well-being (Sandler, Wolchik, MacKinnon, Ayers, & Roosa, 1997). In extreme cases, a lack of coping skills might contribute to an adolescent's decision to commit suicide (Berman & Jobes, 1992; Dixon, Heppner, & Rudd, 1994).

Numerous programs have been suggested to expand adolescents' knowledge about ways of coping (Sandler et al., 1997). Most of these concentrate on fostering the adolescent's adaptation to stress or the initiation of the adolescent's awareness of his or her own internal cognitive processing of the stress (Sandler et al., 1997). Action theory (Young & Valach, 1994; Valach, 1990), by contrast, addresses cognitive, social, and behavioural aspects of human "action." By doing

so, it offers a more comprehensive strategy to foster a person's ability to confront a stressful episode in life.

This article describes the relevance and contribution of action theory in the context of counselling adolescents who are facing the school-to-army transition. This example represents a general framework for counselling people who are facing transitional stress and coping. It should be highlighted that the suggested approach to fostering coping skills emerged from intensive work with adolescents, initially based on a traditional approach to stress encounters but finally re-framed in terms of action theory.

School to Life Transition

Unfortunately, many children in the world may never go to school. Others might enter school, but due to various reasons will have to leave before completion of Grade 12. For these adolescents, not being able to complete high school might be a source of stress and frustration. However, for other adolescents living in developed countries, sometimes completion of high school might be a source of stress as well. This is due to the fact that toward the end of Grade 12 adolescents are facing the transition from school to "life." Usually, in most developed countries, adolescents will move from high school to one of the following settings: work, college/university, marriage, or military service. In these four types of transition, the 12th grader is likely to face new and significant adjustment problems (e.g., Young & Chen, 1999). Moreover, whether consciously or unconsciously, adolescents at this stage of their life are about to move into the developmental period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), facing an extremely demanding future. Finally, for many adolescents the school-to-life transition also involves the first departure from home. It is clear, therefore, that counselling adolescents about the school-to-life transition is a major task for school counsellors as well as for counsellors working at college/university, or in the army.

In Israel, every (Jewish) adolescent is obliged to join the army for two years (females) or three years (males). A large body of data (e.g., Israelashvili, 1992a) has repeatedly testified that most Israeli adolescents agree with the need for their own enlistment, but that they are not sure about their ability to cope with the Army's demands. In view of these findings, and in light of the importance of preparation for school-to-life transition, Israelashvili (1992a; 1992b) designed a preparatory intervention (STA; School-to-Army Preparation) for 12th graders, both boys and girls, who are facing military enlistment. Basically, STA is a prevention program that strives to foster enlistees' self-efficacy and their ability to adjust well to military service. The program is supposed to be operated by school counsellors, in collaboration with teachers, parents, school graduates, and Army (IDF) representatives. Currently, the program (in its full or partial version) is obligatory in all Israeli (Jewish) high schools, and there are several indications of its effectiveness (e.g., Israelashvili & Taubman, 1998).

Originally, the program was related to Meichenbaum's (1985, 1993) Stress Inoculation Training (SIT) model. Two major components of the program are:

(a) presentation of stress sources in the civilian-to-basic-training transition, and (b) the acquisition of coping skills through group discussion. Usually both of these activities can and should be guided by the school counsellor. In terms of the SIT Model, the presentation of the stress sources relates to the *reconceptualization phase*, while the fostering of coping skills relates to the *acquisition phase*. It should be mentioned that in the case of the STA program, these are not the only components. An additional part of the STA program is a week stay at a military camp, which can be seen as representing SIT's *implementation phase*, as well as other activities with the adolescents and their parents.

Most current programs intended to foster coping skills acquisition, including the SIT model, are related to Lazarus's (1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) stress-encounter model. Usually they all share the same purpose of changing the person's cognitions about the nature of stress and his/her ability to cope with the stress. Recently it has been suggested that stress-encounter analysis and inoculation should also address the person's emotions related to the stress event, and not only the person's cognitions (Lazarus, 1993). Our experience with the SIT model implementation, within the context of the adolescent's transition from high school, has led us to make several changes in the coping skills acquisition phase. These changes were implemented, as they seemed to contribute significantly to the counsellor's effectiveness and the students' preparation. However, while these changes were a result of a kind of trial-and-error process, a retrospective overview point to them as a representation of action theory, especially in the coping skill acquisition phase. This conceptual reframing better reflects the comprehensive nature of stress-encounter.

Basically, previous approaches to coping skills acquisition and action theory acknowledge the relevance of several components. Yet the differences between previous approaches and action theory stem from a differential grading of their importance and its implications for interventions to gain some change in people's coping behaviour. Specifically, we felt that more awareness of the motivational and contextual aspects of the stress encounter was needed. Following a short description of the differences between the current program's approach and the action theory approach, an example of counselling in action, based on the action theory approach, will be described.

Action theory (Young & Valach, 2000; Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes, 1994) addresses three aspects of an "action": the manifest behaviour of the actor, the conscious cognition that accompanies this manifest behaviour, and the social meaning in which the action is embedded. The social discourse between counsellor and client contributes to the latter's sense-making of her/his action. The common approach to coping skills acquisition puts the person in the centre of the change process, trying to change their way of coping once they encounter a stressful stimulus. The person is re-educated to evaluate the problem differently and to be equipped with a wider range of coping skills. As these approaches rely heavily on cognitive psychology, they pay homage to the situational components

but, practically speaking, supply the client with universal notions about the nature of stress and with some generalizations about their ability to cope with it. These interventions might result in a shift in the person's global attitude toward coping, rather than with an acquisition of a more comprehensive awareness of the way coping takes place. Alternatively, action theory addresses not only the cognitive or emotional aspects of stress encounter, but also the motivational, behavioural, and contextual aspects as well. Coping is understood to be embedded in various contexts, such as joint actions, that are part of long-term goal-directed systems (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 2002). Hence, action theory offers a different, and more comprehensive, perspective on coping skills acquisition.

The following will serve to clarify what coping is and to show how an action theory approach differs from current approaches to coping skills acquisition. First, coping might have several layers. To begin with, it relates to what the person is doing (i.e., overt behaviour) once faced with the stimulus; next, there is the question of what would be the preferred coping style within the existing circumstances (i.e., not only "How should I respond to my manager's insulting comment?" but also "What is the best way not to be fired from this job?"); and finally, the issue of the person's general approach to coping with stressful life events. While current approaches to coping skills acquisition address these three aspects jointly, action theory suggests that each of them should be addressed, both separately and in relation to the other two.

Second, from an action theoretical perspective, coping can be presented as a social and cognitive problem, rather than as solely a cognitive one. Only rarely does a person have to cope with a stimulus that has no social meaning. This is why, for example, Holms and Rahe (1967) labeled their scale of stressful life events "Social Re-adjustment Rating Scale" (SRRS). According to the action theory approach, the emphasis is placed on developing coping in a social setting, rather than in an individual setting. In this way, the context is more relevant and other significant sources of change can also be incorporated. An example of a major socially embedded source of change is the joint action of the person involved and other members of the group. Moreover, fostering coping skills within a social setting would enable persons to better comprehend stress-encounter situations due to their exposure, through observations and discussions of other people's coping behaviour.

Third, the traditional approach to coping skills acquisition (e.g., Meichenbaum, 1985) is to acquaint a person with as many different coping styles as possible. Action theory, on the contrary, assumes that coping is effective only if it adequately relates to the person's goal. Hence, interventions to promote coping skills should begin with a person's awareness of his/her goals and of the relationship between these goals and possible ways of coping.

In summary, by taking an action theoretical stand, we do not give up the benefits of other common approaches to coping skills acquisition. Rather we have enriched and expanded the original propositions of these programs to allow

a more comprehensive and practical approach to counsel those people who are facing a stressful life event.

Below, two components of the STA program are presented. First, a military psychologist's presentation on stress sources in basic training is outlined. This is followed by a detailed description of a coping acquisition session.

A reconceptualization of school-to-army stress sources

According to Louis (1980), the process of organizational entry can be described as a sequence of "surprises and sense-making." Louis suggests "... newcomers are ill-equipped to make sense of the myriad surprises that potentially accompany them into an unfamiliar organization . . . [hence] newcomers' understandings of their experiences in and of new organizational settings will facilitate newcomers' adaptation" (p. 248). The above quotations highlight the two following facts: First, organizational entry constitutes a series of small-scale events that newcomers have to undergo. Second, information gathering and understanding are prerequisites for those who wish to adjust successfully to any new situation. Therefore, exposing people to possible small-scale problems that they may have to face in a new situation is bound to help them adjust well. Moreover, it might help them even more if we encourage these people to explore the logic of the new situation, rather than assume its irrationality — what they usually tend to do.

Israelashvili (1994) formulated a list of daily hassles in basic training that included events related to, for instance, unfulfilled basic needs, home separation, and social pressure. These events are described to adolescents in the (reconceptualized) stress sources presentation. Adolescents tend to believe that the hardships of military enlistment are connected to physical danger and to the need to obey authority. However, following the presentation they realize that, for example, running out of cigarettes with no store or friends around might be not only stressful but is also more common in military settings. As for the enlistee's physical condition - the stress presentation draws attention to the fact that issues concerning death and dying are usually not relevant at the time of basic training, as soldiers are mostly engaged in basic military maneuvers rather than in dangerous military actions. The 'death' of other relationships are almost inevitable and deserve more attention. Examples of this might be the 'death' of your relationship with your girlfriend (who is not ready to wait for you) or with your ex-school buddies (who happen to be in their military camps when you have a vacation), or even your relationship with your family (who cannot understand what you have been through during the last three weeks due to your commander's order "... not to supply information about your training. . ."). So, in terms of Louis' (1980) model, this presentation exposes future enlistees to the "surprises" they will face in the course of their military enlistment. In terms of action theory, the reconceptualization phase is mainly focusing on turning adolescents' concepts of coping from uni-dimensional to multi-dimensional constructs. What they need at this point is help in what Louis calls "sense-making" — something that is offered by the counsellor in the subsequent coping skills acquisition session.

Coping skills acquisition

This stage of coping skill acquisition follows the presentation of daily hassles in military service and closely refers to their content. It should, however, take place within several days of the presentation. This is due to increasing evidence that many adolescents are initially quite overwhelmed by the new perspectives they have acquired through the presentation. Many adolescents now realize how they have misunderstood the multi-dimensionality of coping, and especially these “small” hassles. Time is needed to let them process this new way of seeing things and to internalize the ramifications. Subsequently they become eager to learn how to cope with all these major stressors and newly discovered, minor daily hassles. This is the time when the counsellor’s intervention is not only possible and welcome but also highly recommended.

Coping behaviour is something that can be taught (Frydenberg, 1999), and the literature suggests various techniques and programs that aim to advance coping behaviour. A feature that most of the programs share is that they tend to put the group counsellor at the centre of the discussion. Alternatively, one might assume that each participant has some knowledge about coping, and that the whole group together has the required knowledge and narratives, either personal or through other people experiences, to guide all participants’ future coping behaviour. Hence, one of the counsellor’s roles in coping skill acquisition would be to initiate adolescents’ readiness to contribute their knowledge and understanding to other group (class) members while, at the same time, listening to others’ reflections and contributions to the group discussion. In terms of the action theory of counselling, we are talking about the joint action of a group of adolescents, aimed to establish and adopt an updated construct of coping behaviour.

It should, however, be mentioned that such a process of an updated coping construct is built on several underlying assumptions regarding the nature of coping behaviour:

1. Basically, there are no golden, ultimate, or secret answers to the question of how a person should cope with the daily stress and hassles associated with military service.
2. There are many common features between coping behaviour within the military context, on one hand, and in other life environments, on the other.
3. A major component of efficient and adjusted coping behaviour is “sense-making” (Louis, 1980) — or cognitive processing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). But this is not the only component.
4. Various people might share similar problems, or at least be in the same situation. Hence the others’ (expected) coping behaviour — and their reaction to your behaviour — should also be taken into account. Sometimes one person’s way of coping will reinforce and encourage another person’s efforts, and vice versa. These are the general assumptions that underlie the practical implementation, as described below.

The coping skills acquisition session starts with the counsellor's summary of the previous stress presentation, followed by a declaration, such as "I know you expect me to tell you how you should cope with all this stress and hassle, but [unfortunately] I have nothing new to tell you. Together you already have the necessary knowledge, and I am here only to help you to communicate it to each other." While this statement sounds simple and straightforward, adolescents often react with disagreement, convinced of their helplessness in coping with military settings. The counsellor then presents concrete hassles, asks for the group's advice and ideas about potential coping behaviour, and lists all suggestions on the blackboard.

A highly stressful situation in the army, mentioned by many soldiers, is "being insulted by a commander, in front of all other peer soldiers. In the coping acquisition session, the counsellor will write this down on the blackboard and will ask adolescents ". . . to raise any suggestion about how one should respond to such an event?" At this point in time it is very important that the counsellor pay attention: (a) to stay with his or her back turned toward the group, to allow anonymity, (b) to accept without comment all suggestions mentioned, for example, "to cry," which is frequently mentioned; "to shut up," which is always mentioned; and even "to kill the commander," which is all too often mentioned, and (c) to keep writing until no further suggestions come.

Now, while the group looks at the list of suggested ways of coping, it is the counsellor's turn to reflect on the list, in order to initiate the adolescents' communication with each other. Firstly, the counsellor will cross out (but not erase) all behaviours that involve inflicting physical harm. Secondly, s/he will identify and explain behaviours that are possible but pointless — for example, the extremely common suggestion of ". . . insulting the commander in return, in front of all other soldiers." The counsellor might explain that this kind of behaviour would actually cause more damage than good: from the commander's point of view, being insulted by a soldier in front of all other soldiers means losing control and authority over the whole group of soldiers. No commander would ever be ready to tolerate this. Another fruitless behaviour would be "to run away from camp" (i.e., to go AWOL). This behaviour turns the personal and local conflict between the soldier and the commander into a conflict between the soldier and the Army; a solution that is against military law. Usually, by commenting on this point, the counsellor draws the adolescents' attention to the need to embed one's coping behaviour in one's future goals in the military context.

This point is further elaborated once the counsellor turns to reflect on the adolescents' partial vision of the stress encounter. This is to say that at this stage, the counsellor's mission is to foster the adolescents' meaning making of the situation, as coping behaviour should always be related and understood in the light of a person's subjective evaluations of both the (stressful) event and the potential and actual ways of coping. Surprisingly enough, in our experience, adolescents who are confronted with a question of how to respond to interpersonal conflict will only rarely raise the possibility of exploring "the opponent's logic" or other

reasons. Many of them are familiar with the notion of empathy, but only a few actually bring it to bear when they are personally confronted with a stressful event. Hence, usually the counsellor can challenge the group by expressing some disappointment that no one raised the simple question: Why? Why is s/he doing this to me? When one of the group members does raise this possibility, the counsellor might draw attention to this solution and ask for the groups' opinion. It is a simple question, but adolescents seldom have simple answers to it. Usually some of them resist any such idea, saying, "Commanders are simply not allowed to insult a soldier." Others might object: "We are not supposed to be the commander's psychologist." Some wonder whether, in such a stress encounter, the soldier has time "to spend" on exploring the commander's point of view. Yet, there will always be some adolescents who are surprised that they could have ignored such a possibility.

Such a diversity of reactions turns the session into a discussion among the participants themselves, with minor interventions from the counsellor. It is well known that adolescents are preoccupied with interpersonal relationships and how significant these relationships are for them (Harris, 1999). However, our experience with such class discussion showed us that frequently their power lies in the adolescents' joint action, as a kind of collaborative mission, to expose and to share personal viewpoints of the problem along with a striving to find an agreed solution. It is our impression that adolescents consider the class discussion not as a limited, irrelevant exchange of ideas, but rather as a small-scale representation of the whole scope of possibilities they might confront in reality. The counsellor might, nevertheless, contribute to the discussion by giving an example of circumstances where the commander is right — for example, when the soldier has done something that could have resulted in the killing of another soldier. Another contribution of the counsellor could be to point out an unexpected coping behaviour. For example, in the case under discussion, one possible, legitimate, way of coping could be not to do anything as long as you have no clear evaluations about the reasons for the commander's behaviour. To do nothing, sometimes what we might call behaviour control, is not at all an option for many adolescents. They are under the mistaken assumption that coping means actively doing. Finally, a major contribution of the counsellor in this part of the discussion would be to prevent the group from reaching an agreed conclusion about the right way of behaving in the event at issue. The counsellor should rather keep highlighting the diversity and scope of behaviours that the adolescents themselves came up with. It is the counsellor's role to emphasize that all of them may be appropriate, at least in theory, as the issue of appropriateness is embedded in the social (e.g., dual/group/unit/organization), rather than individual context.

This is only one event, out of many others, that might serve to initiate adolescents' discussion of coping behaviour. Parallel examples of daily hassles and coping events regarding other transitional episodes adolescents might face (e.g., school-to-work transition; school-to-college transition) can be outlined. Since each and every way of coping that participants have mentioned in the session is

put on the blackboard, at the end of the session the board is full of possible ways of coping. The counsellor will then highlight that the initial question of whether there is a way of coping with the transitional phase under issue, in the current example: the transition from civilian to military life, should be reformulated as follows: "What is the best way of coping in this particular event?" Such a reformulation is extremely helpful for adolescents who entered the session with feelings of disorientation and stress.

CONCLUSION

In the course of the suggested intervention, the construct of "coping" is redefined, focusing on joint action of the counsellor and the group. The focus of the intervention is on encouraging the client to perceive and evaluate the comprehensive situation, rather than to concentrate solely on her/his personal situation and emotions. Moreover, while doing so the counsellor attempts to instill an understanding that each enlistee's coping with military hassles is, actually, a matter of concern for the whole group of new enlistees. Finally, one of the possibilities offered to the participants is the notion that doing nothing is, in fact, a form of action and sometimes the best one possible.

This discussion of coping acquisition in the context of the school-to-army transition is only an example of a variety of potential implementations of action theory for people who are experiencing a transitional state. This intervention stems from theories on organizational entry and, for each hassle here, there are equivalent "civilian" examples in other transitional states. Hence, it is possible to suggest that the present intervention with adolescents who are facing school-to-army transition might contribute to their coping and adjustment in other settings, and at later stages in their lives.

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