

Transactional Model of Stress and Coping

Version 1 • May 2023

The Transactional Model of Stress and Coping provides a useful framework for examining the processes of coping with stressful events. A premise of this model is that people can appraise identical events differently and that individual appraisals, rather than objective characteristics of the event, are key determinants of how the event affects behaviors.

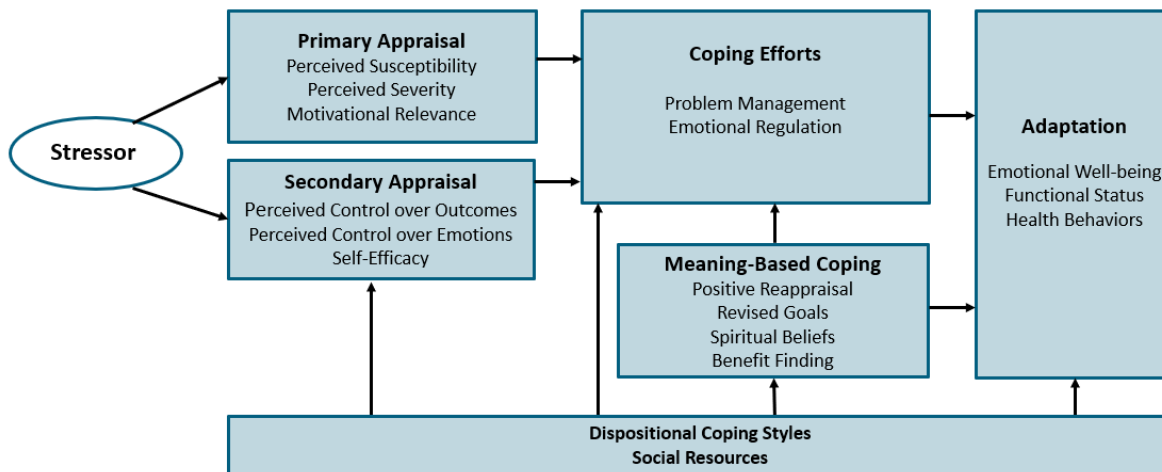
This model's focus is on coping processes that directly modify stressors and mitigate emotional distress resulting from them. In the face of an external stressor, individuals will, 1) assess the potential threat (primary appraisal), 2) evaluate their capacity to manage the threat (secondary appraisal), and 3) use problem- and/or emotion-focused coping strategies to adapt to the stressor (e.g., emotional well-being, functional status, and health behaviors). The model further incorporates the process of facilitating positive emotions in the coping process (meaning-based coping efforts) and the influence of dispositional coping styles (e.g., personality traits) and social resources and supports on processes of stress appraisal, coping efforts, and coping outcomes.

Developer

Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman, 1984

Graphical Representation of Theory and Constructs

(Adapted from Wethington, Glanz, & Schwartz, 2015)



Stressor – Exposure to harmful, threatening, or challenging stimuli or event.

Primary Appraisal – An individual's evaluation of the significance of an event or stressor as stressful, positive, benign, or irrelevant. An individual's perception of their susceptibility to and the severity of a threat prompts efforts to cope with the stressor.

Secondary Appraisal – An individual's evaluation of the controllability of the stressor or threatening event, their available options and coping resources, and their beliefs about their ability to perform behaviors needed to exert control (e.g., self-efficacy).

Coping Efforts – Situation-specific strategies used to mediate the emotional and functional effects of primary and secondary appraisals.

- Problem Management – Problem-focused strategies to solve or manage the problem that is causing distress (e.g., gathering information, acquiring resources, planning, decision-making).
- Emotional Regulation – Emotion-focused strategies aimed at changing the way one thinks or feels about a stressful situation (e.g., venting feelings, avoidance, denial).

Meaning-Based Coping – General coping strategies drawing on one’s values, beliefs, and goals which induce positive emotion through interpretation of the stressor in a personally meaningful way. These efforts are often triggered in response to unsuccessful situation-specific coping and when stressors are perceived to be overwhelmingly aversive or uncontrollable.

- Positive Reappraisal – Reframing a situation to see it in a positive light.
- Revised Goals – The capacity to abandon unsuccessful goal-directed activities and reengage in alternative goals that are attainable and meaningful.
- Spiritual Beliefs – An individual’s meaning and purpose in life gained from life experiences, which may or may not be related to religion.
- Benefit Finding – Identifying positive life changes that have resulted from past major stressors.

Adaptation – The outcomes of coping. An individual’s adaptation to a stressor, following from primary and secondary appraisal and influenced by coping efforts. Main categories include emotional well-being, functional status (e.g., disease progression, health status), and health behaviors.

Dispositional Coping Styles – Stable, individual characteristics or personality traits that moderate the impact of stress on coping processes and outcomes. Coping styles reflect generalized ways of behaving and responding to stress across time and situations (e.g., optimism, sense of purpose).

Social Resources – Tangible and intangible dimensions of an individual’s perceived and/or actual connectedness with others which influence how people appraise and adapt to stressful events.

Application to the Precision Paradigm: Alignment of Theory Constructs with Mechanisms of Action Taxonomy

Mechanisms of Action (MoA), derived from theories of behavior, are the processes through which specific intervention techniques are expected to affect behavior. Interventions grounded in the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping might include techniques to achieve specific changes in behavior by acting through any of these MoAs.

Aspects of constructs in the **Transactional Model of Stress and Coping** correspond to the [Mechanisms of Action taxonomy](#) as follows:

Theory Construct	Corresponding Mechanism(s) of Action
Primary Appraisal	Perceived Susceptibility/Vulnerability
Secondary Appraisal	Beliefs about Capabilities
Problem Management	Knowledge Skills Memory, Attention and Decision Processes Intention Goals
Emotional Regulation	Emotion Behavioral Regulation
Meaning-Based Coping	Values Goals General Attitudes/Beliefs

NOTE: Aspects of the graphical representation of this theory also correspond to other components of the [Precision Paradigm](#):

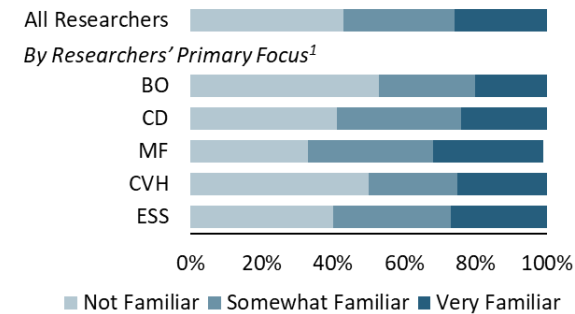
- *Dispositional coping strategies* and *social resources* are context and act as moderators
- *Adaptation* is an outcome

Examples of Use of Theory in Intervention Development/Research

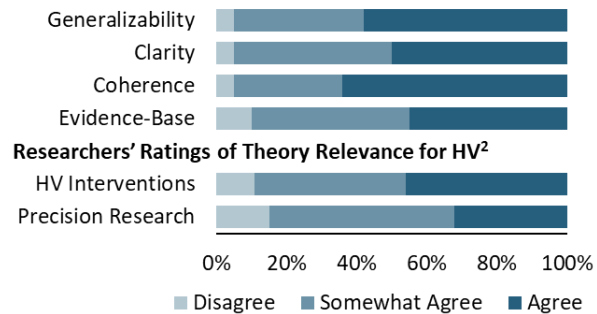
Magteppong, W. & Yamarat, K. (2021). The effects of the Modified Transtheoretical Theory of Stress and Coping Program on dementia caregivers' knowledge, burden, and quality of life. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(24), 13231. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182413231>

Key Results from Intervention Researcher Survey

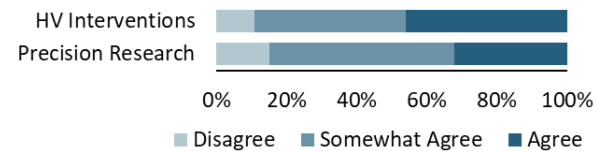
Researchers' Familiarity with the Theory



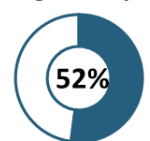
Researchers' Ratings of Theory Quality²



Researchers' Ratings of Theory Relevance for HV²



High Quality³



High Relevance⁴



¹Intervention researchers' primary or secondary area of research; BO=Birth Outcomes; CD=Child Development; MF=Maternal Psychosocial Functioning; CVH=Cardiovascular Health; ESS=Family Economic Self-Sufficiency

²Of those who indicated they were familiar with the theory. Those answering 'Not Sure' to the quality and relevance items were excluded from the denominator.

³Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to all four quality items.

⁴Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to both relevance items.

Methods for the intervention researcher survey can be found [here](#).

Theory Citations

Folkman, S., & Moskowitz, J. (2000). Positive affect and the other side of coping. *American Psychologist*, 55(6), 647–654. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.55.6.647>

Folkman, S., and Moskowitz, J. T. (2004). Coping: Pitfalls and promise. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 55, 745–774. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141456>

Folkman, S. (2008). The case for positive emotions in the stress process. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 21(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800701740457>

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.

Wethington, E., Glanz, K., & Schwartz, M. D. (2015). Stress, coping, and health behavior. In Glanz, K., Rimer, B. K., & Viswanath, K. (Eds.), *Health behavior: Theory, research, and practice* (5th ed., pp. 223-242). Jossey-Bass/Wiley.