Getting Unstuck: Coping Strategies

PiNBAC Workshop (P1+P2)

Dec. 5, 2022

Learning Objectives for this Workshop

At the end of this workshop you will be able to:

- Distinguish between emotion and problem-focused coping strategies

- Identify when it is appropriate to apply emotion and problem-focused coping strategies

- Identify useful resources available to you to help you implement different coping strategies
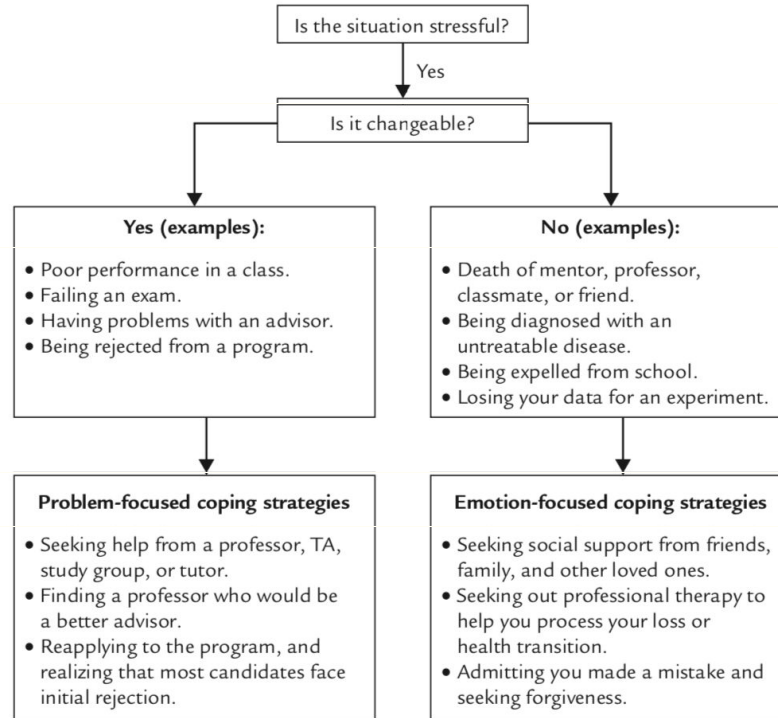
Let's Reflect: How have you been feeling "stuck"?

Take **5 minutes** to identify a specific circumstance or example of how you have been feeling "stuck" or stressed lately in your training (e.g. lab, class, or planning for the future). Write that example down. We'll revisit this later in the workshop.

The Importance of Coping Self-Efficacy

- The feeling of stress arises when your resources for coping are surpassed (Bandura, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

- Developing coping self-efficacy (the confidence to cope with stress effectively) is one thing that trainees can do to help lower their stress level as they work to persist and succeed in school (and lab)

Problem-Focused vs. Emotion-Focused Coping Strategies

Is the situation stressful?

Yes

Is it changeable?

Yes (examples):

- Poor performance in a class.
- Failing an exam.
- Having problems with an advisor.
- Being rejected from a program.

No (examples):

- Death of mentor, professor, classmate, or friend.
- Being diagnosed with an untreatable disease.
- Being expelled from school.
- Losing your data for an experiment.

Problem-focused coping strategies

- Seeking help from a professor, TA, study group, or tutor.
- Finding a professor who would be a better advisor.
- Reapplying to the program, and realizing that most candidates face initial rejection.

Emotion-focused coping strategies

- Seeking social support from friends, family, and other loved ones.
- Seeking out professional therapy to help you process your loss or health transition.
- Admitting you made a mistake and seeking forgiveness.

Note: Most situations require both types of coping. For example, being expelled from school is not something you can change, so it will require some emotion-focused coping; but you can also seek out a new school that might be a better fit, which would be a problem-based coping strategy.

Beware **Maladaptive Coping**

- Occurs when you, usually inadvertently, use problem-focused coping to address unchangeable situations, or emotion-focused coping to address changeable situations.

- For example:
    - Consider a trainee who starts to fail a science class (i.e., changeable situation) and only seeks out social support (i.e., emotion-focused coping). Leveraging emotion-focused coping will not help the trainee learn how to improve their performance, and consequently they may begin to doubt their ability to succeed in science. In this case, seeking social support would likely help the trainee feel valued, but problem-focused coping, such as talking with the teacher about ways to improve performance, or being tutored, would be most helpful for addressing the underlying cause of stress.

Let's Practice: Case Studies

We will walk through a series of scenarios. For each, I will ask you to spend **5 minutes** discussing the scenario with a partner. Please discuss what you would do if you were in that situation.

Be sure to determine whether the situation is **changeable vs. unchangeable**, and whether you would use **problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies, or both**.

We'll then discuss each case as a group.

Case Study #1

You've been working extra hours in the lab to get enough data to earn authorship on the research team's next paper. However, it is unclear how much data will be enough and there is no guarantee that your mentor will include you as an author, even if you contribute a lot of data. Worrying about this has created a lot of stress for you. You've heard that you need to be an author on a peer-reviewed paper to get into the good graduate training programs. On top of this, you're starting to notice that spending a lot of time in the lab is making it difficult to keep up with your other responsibilities like class and professional development, so now you're stressed about that too. What should you do?

Case Study #2

You've been helping a graduate student in the lab up to this point, which is similar to the type of research experience you had as an undergraduate. As a result, you've felt confident and have been able to handle it. However, now your PI would like you to start developing and leading your own research project, which is brand-new territory. You have to be independent. How will you come up with your own project? You're completely stressed, and it feels like your brain is frozen. You don't know where to begin. What should you do?

Case Study #3

You have been working in your post-bac lab for a few months. You are feeling good about your progress in understanding the research context and have gained confidence in your ability to carry out experiments independently. Recently you have noticed that your mentor seems aloof and does not want to talk to you or answer your questions. You have overheard her making remarks to another graduate student about how little you know and how much time it takes to mentor you. You feel caught because you want to do a good job, but sometimes you don't know what you are doing and need to ask questions, but she won't answer them. In the coming week you are supposed to analyze your data and you need your mentor's help. When you arrive in her office to discuss the data analysis, she sees a mistake, tells you to fix it, and puts on her headphones while you make changes to the data file. The uncomfortable working environment is stressful and has diminished your confidence to do research. You're considering leaving the lab. What should you do?

Case Study #4: You!

Return to the specific circumstance or example of how you have been feeling "stuck" or stressed in your training that you wrote down earlier. Take **5 minutes** on your own to determine whether the situation is **changeable vs. unchangeable**, whether you should use **problem-focused coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies, or both**, and what those strategies might be.

I'll then ask for volunteers who are willing to share their examples so that we can discuss as a group.

Wrapping Up

What are some resources available to you to implement problem-based and emotion-based coping strategies?

What questions do you have for me?

References

- Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York, NY: W. H. Freeman.

- Chesney, M. A., Neilands, T. B., Chambers, D. B., Taylor, J. M., and Folkman, S. (2006, Sept. 1). A validity and reliability study of the coping self-efficacy scale. British Journal of Health Psychology, 11(3): 421–437.

- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., and Hackett, G. (2000, Jan.). Contextual supports and barriers to career choice: A social cognitive analysis. Journal of Counseling Psychology, 47(1): 36.