

Running head: STRESS-RELATED GROWTH

The Relationship Between Approach to Coping and
Stress-Related Growth in Response to the Events of
September 11, 2001

Louis Hoffman and A.J. Whitmire

Forest Institute of Professional Psychology

Abstract

This study explored the relationship between stress-related growth and approaches to coping in response to the events of September 11 in a group of psychology graduate students and faculty. Coping skills that involved turning to God, expression of emotions, and containment of emotions were the best predictors of stress-related growth.

The Relationship Between Approach to Coping and
Stress-Related Growth in Response to the Events of
September 11, 2001

The events of September 11, 2001, were of the most stressful events in American history. While few would deny the tragic nature of these events, many have acknowledged that Americans have responded to these events admirably. The current study examines the heroic manner in which many Americans have endured these events and how they have used them for their own personal growth.

Methods

Participants in the study included 148 students (56 male, 89 female) and 9 faculty (5 male, 4 female) at a professional school of psychology. Each participant completed one survey that included a measure of stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), one measure of general coping (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989), and two measures of religious coping (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Kennell, Hathaway, Grevengoed, Newman, & Jones, 1988). Investigators did not include 3 items in the Stress-Related Growth Scale that dealt specifically with religious growth to decrease bias toward the Turning to God approach to coping.

Results

Six of the fourteen approaches to coping significantly correlated with stress-related growth. The best predictors were Turning to God ($r = .24, p < .001$) and Venting ($r = .24, p < .001$). Suppression ($r = .22, p < .01$), Restraint ($r = .21, p < .01$), Seeking Social Support for Instrumental Reasons ($r = .20, p < .01$), and Seeking Social Support for Emotional Reasons ($r = .19, p < .05$) were significantly correlated with stress-related growth. Active Coping, Planning, Positive Reinterpretation, Acceptance, Denial, Behavioral Disengagement, Mental Disengagement, and Alcohol/Drug Disengagement were not significantly correlated with the measure of stress-related growth.

Two of the Religious Problem Solving Scales revealed significant relationships with stress-related growth. The Collaborative Religious Coping Scale had a correlation of .32 ($p < .001$) and the Deferring Religious Coping Scale had a correlation of .36 ($p < .001$). Self-Directed Religious Coping was not associated with stress-related growth. Both scales of the Brief RCOPE were found to be significantly related with stress-related growth. Positive Religious Coping has a correlation of .44 ($p < .001$) and negative religious coping has a correlation of .26 ($p < .001$)

Conclusion

Religious approaches to coping were consistently the most powerful predictors of stress-related growth. The events of September 11 shook the existential core of Americans by challenging our myth of safety and exposing our vulnerability. An event of this magnitude may require a transpersonal framework, such as religion, to help us cope.

The approaches to coping that involved the expression of feelings to others consistently showed a strong relationship with stress-related growth. It is likely that the growth that occurred in response to September 11 was largely due to people becoming more aware of the importance of relationships and reinvesting in them.

The coping styles that attempted to disengage from emotions were unrelated to stress-related growth. However, the coping styles that focused on containing emotions were good predictors of stress-related growth. This highlights the importance of experiencing the emotion, but not allowing the emotion to overwhelm us.

Finally, it was surprising that none of the more active approaches to coping were related to stress-related growth. These approaches to coping may be successful in dealing with other stressful events, but appear to lack the

ability to help cope with a tragedy of this magnitude that shakes our existential core.

References

- Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., & Weintraub, J. K. (1989).
Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based
approach. *Journal of Personality and Social
Psychology, 56*, 267-283.
- Pargament, K. I., Kennell, J., Hathaway, W., Grevengoed,
N., Newman, J. & Jones, W. (1988). Religion and the
problem-solving process: Three styles of coping.
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 27,
90-104.
- Pargament, K. I., Smith, B. W., Koenig, H. G., & Perez, L.
(1999). Patterns of positive and negative religious
coping with major life stressors. *Journal for the
Scientific Study of Religion, 37*, 710-724.
- Parks, C. L., Cohen, L. H., & Murch, R. L. (1996).
Assessment and prediction of stress-related growth.
Journal of Personality, 64, 71-105.