

Brace yourself: Study finds people can use different strategies to prepare for stress

February 18 2015, by Dr. Shevaun Neupert



Detail of a photo by José Antonio Morcillo Valenciano. Retrieved via Flickr.

A pilot study from North Carolina State University finds that people are not consistent in how they prepare mentally to deal with arguments and other stressors, with each individual displaying a variety of coping behaviors. In addition, the study found that the coping strategies people used could affect them the following day.

The findings stem from a pilot study of older adults, which is the first to track the day-to-day coping behaviors people use in advance of stressful

events.

"This finding tells us, for the first time, that these behaviors are dynamic," says Dr. Shevaun Neupert, lead author of a paper describing the study and an associate professor of psychology at NC State. "This highlights a whole new area for researching the psychology of daily health and well-being.

"And these are behaviors that can be taught," Neupert adds. "The more we understand what's really going on, the better we'll be able to help people deal effectively with the stressors that come up in their lives."

To learn more about how older adults prepare themselves mentally ahead of [stressful events](#), the researchers developed a pilot study of 43 adults between the ages of 60 and 96.

Participants were asked to fill out a daily questionnaire on their activities and feelings - including whether anything stressful had happened - on the current day. Participants were also asked to predict whether they expected there to be a stressful event the following day, and how they were preparing for it. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire on eight consecutive days. The researchers ultimately had data on 380 days, since some participants missed reporting days.

"The reporting was done using very specific questions with clearly defined metrics, such as ranking how stressed they felt on a scale of one to five," Neupert explains. The questionnaires also asked participants the extent to which they were engaging in specific behaviors associated with coping with upcoming potential stressors.

The results found that people used different coping behaviors to prepare for different stressors, and that those coping behaviors changed from day to day.

"The findings tell us that one person may use multiple coping mechanisms over time - something that's pretty exciting since we didn't know this before," Neupert says. "But we also learned that what you do on Monday really makes a difference for how you feel on Tuesday."

Some anticipatory coping behaviors, particularly outcome fantasy and stagnant deliberation, were associated with people being in worse moods and reporting more physical health problems the following day. Stagnant deliberation is when someone tries, unsuccessfully, to solve a problem. Outcome fantasy is when someone wishes that problem would effectively solve itself.

However, stagnant deliberation was also associated with one positive outcome. Namely, stagnant deliberation the day before an argument was correlated with fewer memory failures after the argument.

The researchers also looked at plan rehearsal and problem analysis as anticipatory [coping strategies](#). Plan rehearsal involves mentally envisioning the steps needed to solve the potential problem, and problem analysis is actively thinking about the source and meaning of a future problem. The researchers found that the use of these strategies changed from day to day, but the changes in these strategies were not related to well-being the next day. They were also not related to the way that people responded to arguments the next day.

"This was a pilot study, so we don't want to get carried away," Neupert says. "But these findings are very intriguing. They raise a lot of questions, and we're hoping to follow up with a much larger study."

The paper, "Solving Tomorrow's Problems Today? Daily Anticipatory Coping and Reactivity to Daily Stressors," was published online Feb. 13 in the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*.

Provided by North Carolina State University

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