

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF COPING WITH STRESS BY MEN AND WOMEN

Edited by Karel Paulík

This monograph addresses the differences in adaptive behaviour by men and women in situations of increased stress. In addition to a theoretical analysis of the issue in question, the book also reports on the findings of four research studies focusing on (1) the influence of masculinity and femininity on coping strategies; (2) coping with stress related to work and university study;

(3) coping with stress related to job loss; (4) the role of spirituality in coping with stress.

The text is divided into two main parts, each of which is subdivided into five chapters.

Part 1 (DEMANDS, STRESS, ADAPTATION, author Karel Paulík) contains the following chapters: Types of demands and stress; The concept of adaptation; Predispositions for dealing with demands and stress; Coping strategies; Resistance. The text presents a theoretical analysis of the issues, including a definition of key concepts and a summary of research to date. The author distinguishes between adaptation – as a more general, broader concept concerning how an individual deals with demands in general, and coping – as a way of dealing with difficult or stressful situations. Adaptation involves both active and passive processes (accommodation, assimilation), and the effect of these processes on the individual may not always be positive. Coping is focused on achieving a positive result – dealing successfully with problems related to given situations. The terms ‘adaptation’ and ‘coping’ essentially correspond with the concepts of demands and stress in our systemic conception; stress is considered a special type of non-optimal demand (a demand which exceeds or fails to make use of the individual’s capacity for adaptation). The author also focuses on the theoretical model of the adaptation process and its factors, issues of coping strategies and their types, and the multidimensional concept of resistance.

Part 2 (MEN, WOMEN AND COPING) is the work of four authors. The first chapter (Basic conceptual issues and relations – author Karel Paulík) presents a general analysis of the relevant terminology used in psychological research into coping, and outlines research carried out to date by the authors involved in the research project. The conceptual framework applied in the research focuses mainly on terms characterizing the adaptation process in terms of an individual’s interaction with the environment in specific circumstances, including both external and internal conditions and taking into account gender specificities. A key question is whether there are differences between men’s and women’s behaviour in a range of stress-related situations, or whether men and women in fact behave similarly in many such situations; this also concerns the question whether there are in fact real psychological differences between men and women, or whether statements of such differences are based on prejudices, stereotypes, and largely unsupported generalizations.

The second chapter in this part (The influence of masculinity and femininity on coping strategies – author Anna Schneiderová) focuses on the effect of dispositional characteristics of masculinity, femininity and androgyny in stress situations. Masculinity is associated more closely with instrumental personality characteristics (assertiveness, ambition, dominance), while femininity is characterized by expressive personality characteristics (warmth, delicacy). Androgyny combines both masculine and feminine qualities; androgynous individuals (regardless of sex) are more flexible and adapt more easily to situations. Androgyny also appears to be a relatively optimal personality construct involving socially acceptable characteristics and behaviour; it is manifested in the effective processing of demands and adaptive reactions to particular situations. The research focused on whether and how masculinity and femininity affect the choice of coping strategies regardless of biological sex, and to what extent the choice of coping strategies is conditioned by dispositional optimism, age and length of career.

The third chapter (Coping with stress related to work and university study – author Karel Paulík) is based on an analysis of occupational stress in teachers, non-teaching professions and university students. The author presents the findings of empirical research on sex-related differences in the perception of stress and the choice of coping strategies. 10–36 % of respondents rated their occupational stress as higher than life stress as a whole. This shows that work- and study-related stress is an important aspect of life for many people. Assessment of stress is influenced to a certain extent by personality traits such as SOC, hardiness, neuroticism, etc.). Some differences between men and women were found in the choice of coping strategies and in the influence upon individuals of age and variables related to stress resistance (especially SOC).

The fourth chapter (Coping with stress caused by job loss – author Petr Saforek) draws on the assumption that the importance (value) of employment was, and possibly still is, socially constructed differently for men and for women. Empirical research focuses on perception of job loss and the choice of coping strategies. The results show that there are significant differences (and similarities) between men and women and between individual types of gender roles with regard to the subjective evaluation and experience of job loss, the emotional and behavioural reactions to such an event, and ways of dealing with this stress. The difference in perception of job loss-related stress and the choice of coping strategies is also significantly influenced by external stress influences – the novelty of the stress situation (whether the individual is experiencing job loss for the first time) and the duration of the situation (length of unemployment).

The fifth chapter (Coping with stress and spirituality – author Alina Cogiél) focuses on coping responses containing a spiritual dimension, whether religious or non-religious in nature. This aspect of the research drew on the hypothesis that spirituality acts as a source of strength in difficult life situations, helping individuals to overcome problems. The chapter includes a conceptualization of spiritual coping based on theoretical analysis. The construct of spiritual coping is situated in a multidimensional, dynamic, multivalent and transaction-based system of relationships with a range of other processes and phenomena. The findings in this area of the research bring entirely new insights in the Czech context; these insights can be applied e.g. in counselling or psychotherapy.