ASSESSMENT PROBLEM OF CONSTRUCTIVE COPING STRATEGIES OF AN INDIVIDUAL IN EXTREME SITUATIONS

Valerii F. Bosniuk

Abstract. The main theoretical approaches to the classification of coping strategies are considered. Assessment criteria of constructive coping strategies are presented. The relationship characteristics between coping strategies and the professional success of the rescuer are shown in the article. It is proved that it is impossible to interpret coping strategies as productive or nonproductive. It is argued that both productive and nonproductive components are represented in each behavioral strategies in stressful situation simultaneously.

Key words: coping behavior, coping strategies, professional success, rescuer.

Introduction. The rapid growth of researches in coping behavior led to fast increase of ways to cope with stress, so the problem of classification and selection of criteria of their effectiveness has become very important[6]. Multidimensional coping strategies are their important characteristics, which allows him/her to perform a variety of functions: to solve problems and to prevent their appearance, to control his/her emotions, to interact with stress or to avoid it, to change herself/himself, situation or to adapt to it.

Many researchers propose to consider constructive and non-constructive coping. Constructive coping strategies involve achieving their own goals, ask people who are involved in the situation or have problem solving experience of similar situations for help, careful examination of the problem and various ways of its development or solution, re-examination of the problem situation. Nonconstructive types include various ways of psychological protection, passivity, avoidance, impulsive behavior (frustration, extravagant acts, aggression).

At the same time, it is impossible to determine which coping strategies are constructive or non-constructive, adaptive or maladaptive, as for each person in each situation there are the most successful ways to cope with stress. And as a result, unfortunately, today there is no generally accepted classification.

These problems are very important for specialists of extreme activity profile (rescuers, astronauts, pilots, military personnel, military force structures, etc.). The professional life of these specialists takes place in special conditions, which requires them to use effective coping in stressful situations for the successful performance of his/her duties.

Methodology. Basic methodological principles of this study were determined by the specifics of the tasks. A comprehensive approach to the study of conscious and

---

[6] Александрова Л. А. (2010): Стратегии совладания: попытка системной характеристики, с. 176.

unconscious forms of behavior in stressful conditions and criteria of their effectiveness required to use the system approach principles. It involves studying the phenomenon as a holistic approach that is considered in many external and internal relationships. (O. Leontev, B. Lomov. V. Shchadrikov)

The system approach determines the need to study a person as a complex system, where reflective, self-regulatory and communicative functions of psyche are closely related with human physiology and anatomy, function and structure, interacting with each other and their environment. In order to study the coping behavior of the rescuer the system approach should be based on the implementation of two fundamental principles: 1) the mental health should be considered as a multilevel hierarchical system that has a certain internal structure that is included into the system of higher order; 2) the coping behavior should be considered as the derivative characteristics of the system of a person's activity, that is also a system that has certain components that are interconnected with the mental health resources of the specialist.

However, the system approach does not provide all the reasons for studying the characteristics of the coping behavior of the rescuer. According to A. Broushlinsky, this methodological principle can not determine what exactly is a system, a subsystem, its components and their interconnections in every particular case. B. Lomov, D. Zavalishina, V. Barabanshchikov propose to use the polysystem theory during the analysis of complex multidimensional mental phenomena. These phenomena also include the phenomenon of coping behavior. In our opinion, the polysystem approach is the most perspective for studying coping behavior in the following categories "professional environment – activity – personality".

In addition, in our study, the system approach was implemented with other more specific scientific methods and theories: subjective-activity approach (B. Ananiev, L. Vygotsky, A. Leontiev, S. Rubinstein, K. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, A. Brushlinsky, E. Klimov) and personal approach (L. Antsiferova, V. Bodrov, D. Bright, F. Jones, T. Kruikova).

Theoretical and empirical researches of effective professional development activities (Y. Ilyin, O. Rodina, B. Teplov, Yu. Prikhodko and others) were included into the development of theoretical perspectives evaluating the efficiency of coping strategies of rescuers.

The aim of the research is to study the problem of assessing the constructive coping strategies of an individual in extreme situations.

To achieve this aim, the following tasks must be completed:

1. To analyze scientific literature with the classification problem of coping strategies.

2. To study the characteristics of the relationship of coping strategies with the rescuer professional development.

3. To analyze the criteria of constructive individual coping strategies in extreme situations.

The object of the research is the coping behavior of the individual.

The subject of research is the assessment criteria of coping strategies of rescuers.

To complete the tasks, the methods of theoretical (analysis, synthesis, comparison, modeling, systematization and generalization of scientific theory and

special research data, etc.) and empirical approaches (testing, interviewing, statistical methods) were used.

Results of the research. Traditionally, the term "coping" distinguishes a coping process, which reproduces the dynamics of overcoming challenges, coping behavior, which shows the individual readiness to overcome life's challenges, and coping strategies, which represent a typical way out of difficulties for this person.

Coping strategies are usually considered as actions which people use when they are in a difficult situation. This concept combines cognitive, emotional, behavioral strategies which are used to overcome tension and stressful situations. The term "coping strategy" was proposed by L. Murphy in 1962 to identify the behavioral responses of a child who overcomes the development challenges. Later R. Lazarus in his book "Psychological stress and the process of overcoming it" used this term to refer to conscious strategies in the process of managing and reducing stress. For a long time, the concept that a person uses coping only when the complexity of the situation exceeds the psychic energy of individual's common reactions, that is, in stressful situations was dominant. There is a need to waste more energy, than a person uses under ordinary conditions. In modern research studies the term "coping" is used to determine human behavior not only in difficult situations but also in ordinary conditions when you need to overcome everyday challenges (e.g., family and relationship problems, professional life problems, financial problems etc.). In the 80-ies of the XX th century concept of coping was studied very actively. The focus of research was to clarify this phenomenon (R. Lazarus, S. Folkman, N. Endler, J. Parker), the variety selection (R. Lazarus, S. Folkman, K. Pargament), to identify the relationship with other psychological phenomena (N. Bolger, A. Zuckerman, S. Roche, B. Weiner) etc.

Nowadays, the most popular classification of coping strategies is by R. Lazarus and S. Volkman, where problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies are highlighted. Problem-focused coping strategy is related to human efforts to overcome a challenge or at least change one element of it. This group includes the following coping strategies: planned problem solving, information search and confrontation. Planned problem solving as a coping strategy is that the individual has a scheme to overcome the challenges.

Developing a plan for problem solving is closely related to such coping strategy as information seeking. J. Tereliak, J. Rodrigue, S. Jackson, M. Perie point out that the information seeking indicates a detailed analysis of the situation carried out by the person, as well as the necessary information about alternative ways to get out of it. R. Lazarus and S. Volkman also include confrontation into a group of problem-focused coping strategies. This strategy involves human efforts to change the problem situation, resorting to aggressive actions, and expressing anger and dissatisfaction with what caused the difficulties. Using emotion-focused coping strategies, according to R. Lazarus, S. Volkman, N. Andler, J. Parker, J. Tereliak, a person focuses on his/her own experiences when he/she faces the difficulties. With this strategy, a person reduces negative emotions, controls his/her own emotions, and can change his/her emotional attitude to disadvantages of life. R. Lazarus and S. Volkman include distancing, self-blame, self-control, support seeking, and a positive

reassessment of the problem situation into the group of emotion-focused coping strategies. The distancing strategy involves the individual efforts, aimed to separate oneself from difficulties, to stop thinking negative thoughts. Self-blame as a coping strategy consists of constant self-criticism of everything that a person is doing, thinking or experiencing, and aggression towards oneself. Self-control is a coping strategy, associated with negative emotions suppression and self-regulation. The strategy of positive reassessment considers the situation as a positive, despite the objective characteristics of the situation and the damages that a person suffered. In the studies by J. Tereliak, J. Rodrigue and S. Jackson, support seeking also belogs to a group of emotion-focused coping strategies. Its essence is in the individual efforts to search information, material and emotional support from people around.

R. Lazarus and S. Volkman among the emotion-focused coping strategies pay considerable attention to avoidance, which develops the imagination about the process of problem solving. Scientists point out that avoidance is a combination of efforts made by a person to get rid of the problem. A person may behave as if nothing has happened or change activity (for example, he/she tries to distract his/her attention from the problem by another activity, works heavily, or vice versa, decides to rest, to travel, etc.). It should be noted that, avoidance as a coping strategy, unlike escaping as a defense mechanism, is characterized by awareness, the sense of purposefulness and a clear understanding of what causes problems. Unconscious escape involves the involuntary forgetting the information that is injuring or preventing injury from being perceived. Avoidance as a coping strategy is a conscious resistance because it can hurt. As a conscious behavioral strategy, avoidance is used in a conflict: they try to avoid meetings with the other side of the conflict, under no circumstances take part in conversations about the subject of a dispute, distract themselves and others from the problem.

There are other classifications of coping strategies. For example, L. Perlin and K. Schuler singled out the following groups of coping strategies:
  • strategies to change the point of view on the problem;
  • strategies to change the problem, restructuring situation, searching for its structural units, which a person can use for problem solving;
  • Strategies for managing emotional stress (distress).

J. Scheffer and R. Moos propose to divide the coping strategy into three groups depending on their orientation (i. e. depending on their actions):
  • focused on the problem (related to a variety of decision-making methods and concrete actions to overcome challenges);
  • focused on experiences (maintaining emotional balance and managing emotions and feelings);
  • focused on the assessment (to assess of the situation).

Many researchers classify coping strategies depending on the types of mental processes which are the basis for some strategies (R. Granovska, I. Nikol'skaya, and others):
  • cognitive strategy (associated with cognitive processes involved in decision-making, problem-solving);

• emotion-regulation strategy (associated with emotional self-regulation while managing stress);

• behavioral strategy (developing an action plan to overcome challenges).

• Sometimes, a dichotomous division of coping strategies, based on their effectiveness, into two classes is proposed:

• effective strategies (productive, efficient, functional, which allows a person to solve a problem, to overcome the challenges with minimal resources, etc.);

• ineffective strategies, with exact opposite characteristics.[7]

The development of coping strategies research is active in science now. Coping strategies are used to apply to specific problems and to specialists of different types of professions – applied branch.

Particular relevance of the study of stress-resistance is in occupations, where human errors can lead to losing their and others' lives. These occupations include rescue jobs. They are characterized by a real risk to health and life, by a significant personal responsibility for result, as well as lack of time to make the decision.

Assessing the effectiveness of the coping strategies of rescuers in occupational stress situations, one can focus on F. Cohen and R. Lazarus formulations of five types of tasks that a person faces in a difficult situations: 1) reducing negative effects of circumstances and increasing chances of recovery (recovery); 2) patience, adaptation or regulation, transformation of life situations; 3) positive evaluation of oneself, self-confidence; 4) support of emotional balance; 5) to maintain and save close relationships with other people.[8] The effectiveness of strategies can be considered depending on how they fulfill the common adaptive tasks.

Our experimental research was carried out on the basis of fire and rescue departments of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine in the Kharkiv region. To study coping strategies, the "Coping Test" by R. Lazarus was used. The expert evaluation method – the method of paired comparisons by T. Saati was used for activity assessment of rescuers.

It was found out that in statistics, the importance of the coping strategy for "problem-solving planning" and "acceptance of responsibility" correlates with the performance of rescuer activity ($r = 0,32$, $p \leq 0,01$; $r = 0,25$; $p \leq 0,05$) It is important that there was no link between the effectiveness of activity with coping strategies aimed at emotional response and social orientation. This means that the success of the rescue worker involves the use of concrete and practical steps for problem-solving. Problem-solving plan and acceptance of responsibility for its result assumes a certain logical completeness of the situation that is shown in the performance of activity, although it requires considerable efforts of an individual. Thus, the use of problem-oriented strategies is associated with the rescuer's ability to control people around, to control activities, to use the possibilities effectively and to accept it as your personal growth.

Mainly, the results of studying coping strategies connection with professional success are agreed by most scholars. Firstly, the strategies for active overcoming

---

[7] Грабовська С. (2010): Проблема копінгу в сучасних психологічних дослідженнях, с. 193.
[8] Cohen F., Lazarus R. S. (1979): Coping with the stresses of illness, p. 226.

challenges, using concrete and practical steps for problem-solving, are positively related to the achievement of success in the activity. Secondly, the use of the coping strategy "avoidance" does not contribute to a complete adaptation, a person does not satisfy with his/her activities. Thirdly, applying of positive revaluation strategy, a person is distracted from specific practical problems solving, artificially shifting attention from one object to another. Although at the same time the researchers have no doubts that positive attitude in difficult circumstances reduces distress and promotes emotional adaptation to stress. So, this coping strategy is non-constructive as it does not lead to the problem solving, but at the same time it is adaptive, because it supports mental state of an individual.

After analyzing the results, in our opinion, it is impossible to interpret the coping strategies as productive or non-productive. It is more correct to say that each coping strategy has both a productive and a non-productive component simultaneously. Thus, in problem-oriented strategies, as a productive one, supports the sense of self-efficacy, as unproductive – the "illusion of control" when the rescuer underestimates the complexity of situation and its difficulty and overestimates his/her ability to manage it, as well as the effect of resource depletion; there is the possibility of emotional discharge, or emotional fixation that can cause psychosomatic disorders accordingly in emotion-focused strategies; in social strategies – supporting others, obtaining additional information or loss of mental autonomy, respectively. Besides, in our opinion, it is not quite right to compare the emotion-focused strategies with the problem-focused, as a change of emotional state can be caused by using any copying. Moreover, constructively, emotion changes during problem solving, but not when a person changes his/her attitude to it or avoids it.

From this point of view we can explain why experienced rescuers do not have tendency to choose the planned problem-solving coping strategy, the tendency observed by O. Sklen.[9] It is not always effective, its realization may be accompanied by excessive psychological effects. It is also clear why these individuals prefer strategies "distancing" and "self-control", as they can be quite effective, because they allow to "have a break", the results are the following: moving away from people around and focusing on his/her internal resource mobilization.

As for such a coping strategy as "social support," this form of active social interaction can be attributed to a productive type, because the need for close relationships with other people can have a relaxation effects and provide more information about the situation. According to I. Kaminina, social support in extreme conditions is not instrumental, but semantic, as it aims to increase internal resources of the individual, but not to solve problems at the expense of others.[10]

Experienced rescuers also have no tendency to use avoidance coping strategy[11]. It is one of the least effective, that works on the principles of psychological defense mechanisms. Although this strategy may be effective in situations where there is a

---

[9] Склень О. І. (2008): Психологічні особливості поведінкових стратегій подолання стресу в професійній діяльності працівників пожежно-рятувальних підрозділів МНС України, с. 101.

[10] Камынина И. В.(2008): Копинг-стратегии личности в экстремальных условиях, с. 25.

[11] Склень О. І. (2008): Психологічні особливості поведінкових стратегій подолання стресу в професійній діяльності працівників пожежно-рятувальних підрозділів МНС України, с. 98.

need to move away from an interpersonal conflict or to wait until the problem is no longer relevant as it is impossible to resolve it "here and now".

Perhaps, higher rates of emotion-focused and social-focused coping strategies among experienced rescuers may also be explained by the fact that they, due to their maturity, "are not afraid" to demonstrate relatively non-productive coping strategies.

Perhaps, the frequent use of social-focused and emotion-focused coping by rescues can be explained by the features of professional activity. This activity can be divided into two types, which very differ. The former type occupies extended periods of combat duty and is characterized by a standby signal for departure, that is, significantly reduced activity, but at the same time, constant readiness for action. This period can be called an alarm standby mode, which is an essential feature of professional activity and can impact the features of the coping behavior of a specialist. Being constantly in a state of operative rest, a rescuer must be ready for emergency situation. This is one of the types of monotony, that causes fatigue. The excitement of some rescuers caused by the expectation for fire is accompanied by a reaction that can outweigh the reaction that occurs during the fire fighting. And of course, during such period the use of problem-oriented coping will be non-productive and inappropriate, because it depletes energy resources. The use of emotion-focused and social-focused coping during this period of activity will be more effective.[12]

The second period of rescuers' activity is characterized by direct actions for the elimination of emergency situations. In this case using problem-oriented coping will be a productive and unjustified psychological defense mechanisms, because a rescuer is responsible not only for his/her own life, but also for the life of others, for the preservation of the property.

Conclusions. So, the process of managing stress factors can be effective in one problem situation, but in another situation, when the level of its control by the individual is not significant, the use of the same combinations of coping strategies may not provide the desired result. Accordingly, constructive coping-behavior means the ability to use all copying strategy types taking into account, first of all, the productive component, focusing on the situation, so, it is necessary to talk about such qualities of the stress management as mobility and variability, the implementation of which limits the effect of psychological defense mechanisms.

References:
1. Александрова Л. А. Стратегии совладания: попытка системной характеристики / Л. А. Александрова, А. А. Лебедева, Д. А. Леонтьев // Психология стресса и совладающего поведения в современном российском обществе: материалы II Международной научно-практической конференции. – Кострома, 2010. – Т. 2. – С. 176-177.
2. Боснюк В. Ф., Олефір В. О., Перелигіна Л. А. Інтелектуально-емоційний ресурс копінг-поведінки рятувальника. – Х.: ХНАДУ, 2016. – 196 с.

---

[12] Боснюк В. Ф., Олефір В. О., Перелигіна Л. А. (2016): Інтелектуально-емоційний ресурс копінг-поведінки рятувальника, с. 184.

3. Грабовська С. Проблема копінгу в сучасних психологічних дослідженнях / С. Грабовська // Соціогуманітарні проблеми людини. – 2010. – № 4. – С. 188-199.

4. Камынина И. В. Копинг-стратегии личности в экстремальных условиях: автореф. дисс. на соискание науч. степени канд. психол. наук: спец. 19.00.01 «Общая психология, история психологии» / И. В. Камынина. – Хабаровск, 2008. – 25 с.

5. Склень О. І. Психологічні особливості поведінкових стратегій подолання стресу в професійній діяльності працівників пожежно-рятувальних підрозділів МНС України: дис. … канд. психол. наук: 19.00.09 / Склень Олексій Іванович. – Х., 2008. – 198 с.

6. Cohen F. Coping with the stresses of illness / F. Cohen, R. S. Lazarus // Health psychology. – San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979. – P. 217-254.