

EXPLORING THE RESOURCES OF COMPASSION AND NATURE CONNECTEDNESS TO DEVELOP THE PROACTIVE COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This article discusses the complexity of proactive coping strategies in the light of the research of the psychological constructs of compassion and nature connectedness. The proactive coping process was conceptualized as a positively-focused striving for goal. It is regarded as future-oriented, goal management and positive motivated. The dynamic of this process involves resources accumulation, preventing resource depletion and mobilizing resources when needed.

The present study aims to explore the link among compassion (towards the humans as well as towards the environment), nature connectedness (as a basic human psychological need) and proactive coping strategies. It is expected that if someone is compassionate and has a psychological/emotional connection with nature, it is more likely to deal successfully with present and future threats to personal goals, health or well-being.

Statistical results confirmed this hypothesis. The results of the present research could be used to design personal optimization and development interventions to promote proactive coping strategies in the field of counseling and psychotherapy.

Key words: personal optimization and development, psychotherapy, connection with nature, mental health

1. INTRODUCTION

The high amounts of negative effects generated by the Covid 19 pandemic increased the urgent need to examine the importance of coping strategies. In the psychological literature of coping, the proactive coping has emerged as a new focus of research and practice. Proactive coping was conceptualized as a positively-focused striving for goals, involving competencies such as use of resources, realistic goal setting, and optimism. This process was regarded as future-oriented, goal management and positive motivated. The dynamic of this process involves resources accumulation, preventing resource depletion and mobilizing resources when needed (Polk et al, 2020; Serrano et al, 2021). The collective traumatic experience of the Covid pandemic generated a larger interest for the development of a more complex and holistic perspective on the proactive coping that could be useful in this unprecedented global crisis. Nature exposure was considered a major aspect of this proactive coping perspective during the Covid pandemic, with several health outcomes (lower depression, anxiety, stress, improved well-being, mental health, cognitive functioning, attention restoration, fewer sleep disturbances) and a potential protective influence through building the capacity for health and reducing the risk of severe outcomes (Lahib et al, 2022). The concept of nature connectedness was the most frequently used term to describe a positive human-nature

relationship (Barrable, 2019), based on the individual's sense of self, where nature and humanity are one (Richardson et al, 2019). As it is described in different studies, this concept refers to the person's subjective experience connected to inner personal self and humanistic values (Lumber, Richardson, Sheffield, 2017). Nature connectedness was often described both as a relatively stable personality factor (Marschall, 2021; Richardson et al, 2020; McMahan et al, 2018) as well as a state, which can be changeable according to our experiences (Barrable, 2019) or the social context (Mc Mahan et al, 2018). Other psychologists considered it as an instinctive human need that when fulfilled provides important psychological benefits (Benzon, Aruta, 2021). Nature connectedness has several interacting dimensions relevant both on the individual and the societal level: cognitive, affective, learnt, experiential, personality (Lumber, Richardson, Sheffield, 2017; Barrable, 2019), material and philosophical (Muhr, 2020). Nature connectedness involves also an emotional dimension of experience related to the compassionate behavior (Marschall, 2021; Pomier, 2019). The compassionate person has the capacity to care and a very authentic desire to support others in suffering. This capacity extends across nature and universe becoming a very important inner resource.

Given the multiple positive benefits of nature connectedness on mental and physical health, recent research focused on identifying the activities that people enjoy doing in their relation with nature. These rather simple but significant activities extend the relation with nature in a form of a personal inner discovery process involving the direct, sensorial contact and profound emotional and spiritual experiences (Lumber, 2017; Richardson et al, 2020). These findings suggested the importance of finding the meaning in simple moments spent in nature. Both presence of meaning and search for meaning in life have mediated the positive association between nature connectedness and well-being (Benzon, Aruta, 2021). The results are consistent with other researches (Eisenbeck et al, 2021) touting the value of a coping style based on the activation of the resources of meaning and purpose in life.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the interrelationships among proactive coping, compassion and nature connectedness. We used two factors to measure nature connectedness: the amount of time spent in nature and personal (direct and indirect) involvement in several simple nature activities, following a description offered by Richardson et al (2021).

Hypothesis: 1. A higher use of proactive coping strategies is associated with more actively involvement in simple nature activities. 2. A higher development of compassion (humanity and mindfulness) is related to a higher use of proactive coping strategies.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methods: Psychometrical and statistical methods were used in this correlational study.

Psychometrical instruments: The Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI) and The Compassion Scale (CS). To measure connexion with nature, we used a short survey including items describing simple nature related activities, such as mentioned by Richardson et al (2021).

The Proactive Coping Inventory (PCI) (Greenglass et al. 1999) consists of seven scales (proactive coping, preventive coping, reflective coping, strategic planning, instrumental support seeking, emotional support seeking and avoidance coping) and a total of 55 items. The Inventory is based on the idea of multidimensional coping and it was proved to have a high internal consistency (alpha Cronbach coefficients ranging from .71 to .85 for all seven subscales).

The Compassion Scale (CS) represents a general factor of compassion for others, composed of four subscales representing greater kindness, common humanity, mindfulness, and lessened indifference. The 16-item scale has strong psychometric properties.

The nature connection survey consisted in 13 items describing nature related activities: time spent in nature and simple direct (sitting or relaxing in a garden, listening to bird song, smelling wildflowers etc.) or indirect (watching or listening to nature programs on the TV or radio, looking at books, photos, or websites about the natural world etc.) nature activities.

Participants: 62 students from the University of Pitesti participated in this study (50 females and 12 males). Their participation was voluntary and anonymous.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Pearson Correlation Coefficient and Descriptive Statistics were performed to test the hypothesis of the study. The most significant values were: proactive coping – nature connection ($r=0,368$, $p=0,003$); strategic planning – nature connection ($r= 0,362$, $p=0,004$); proactive coping – mindfulness ($r= 0,282$, $p=0,026$); reflective coping – humanity ($r=0,339$, $p=0,007$); reflective coping – mindfulness ($r=0,287$, $p= 0,024$); preventive coping – kindness ($r=0,320$, $p=0,011$); preventive coping – humanity ($r=0,291$, $p=0,022$); instrumental support seeking – humanity ($r= 0,290$, $p=0,022$) and emotional support seeking – mindfulness ($r=0,254$, $p=0,047$).

Discussions

This study aimed to describe the interrelationships among proactive coping, compassion and nature connectedness. The statistical results confirmed the hypothesis regarding the existence of significant correlations between proactive coping (proactive coping and strategic planning scales) and nature connection (simple nature related activities), as well as between proactive coping scales and compassion (kindness, mindfulness and humanity factors). As stated in the introduction, we considered nature connection and compassion towards others as important psychological and social resources of proactive coping process. Spending time in nature, exploring nature through simple activities (in an active or pasive manner), alone or in the company of others, could develop a deeper, more profound and meaningfull relation with nature. A positive personal emotional and empathic experience with nature, along with a compassionate attitude towards self, others and the environment increase the person's potential for change. These resources stimulate the process of autonomous goal setting and tenacious goal pursuit, the person's capacity for reflective, strategic planning. This is not a selfish but rather an altruistic and caring process, based on an authentic desire to ease distress and activated by an attitude of kindness, empathy, a sense of connection to those in suffering and a sense of balanced awareness. These positive emotional strategies could serve as a context for the maintenance or the restoration of one's sense of meaning and purpose in life, a valuable and also protective resource for the future.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our results highlight the importance to extend the concept of coping to include nature (in the form of nature conectedness) and compassion (in the form of kindness, humanity and mindfulness). The process of proactive coping became more centred in the present and psychologically fluid, allowing the person to balance awareness into being willing to listen to personal needs and to pay attention to others and to nature when they are suffering.

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