The Impact of Social Isolation on Coping Style Utilization

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Abstract

This study explores the different coping styles used depending on the individuals perceived level of social isolation. 151 undergraduate students from the University of Bridgeport were recruited to complete scales used to measure coping styles (Carver, 2013) and Social Isolation (UCLA Loneliness scale; Russell, 1996). Results demonstrated that styles of coping were impacted when comparing high vs. low perceived social isolation. This has ramifications for future studies, which should explore the socio-cognitive mechanisms underlying these changes.

Introduction

The need to belong is argued to be one of the fundamental needs and motives for human behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Current literature examines the psychological implications of social isolation and exclusion, as well as the emotional response. (Grüter & Maas, 1995; Williams, 1997, 2003). However, social psychologists have not studied the coping styles frequently used by individuals who perceive themselves as highly socially isolated versus not socially isolated.

The term social isolation has been defined as the avoidance or refusal of being present among others, resulting in an individual isolating themselves (Delks & Christophe, 2018). Literature suggests that social isolation is often a result of an individual’s experience of negative emotions, stress, or a perceived threat to one’s self (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Vanhalst, Goossens, Layecka, Scholte, & Engels, 2013). Physical pain has also been found to be associated with social isolation and exclusion (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003).

In addition, the concept of ostracism is closely related to social isolation and rejection. Research has determined several behavioral effects of ostracism, such as anger and the excessive attempt to strengthen or restore the stressor or threat is viewed as changeable, resulting the turn may lead to antisocial behaviors (Williams, 2007). However, frequent exposure to social exclusion appears to weaken an individual’s coping abilities, resulting in further social isolation (Williams, 2007).

How coping styles are directly related to either high versus low social isolation has not been examined in the current literature. Thus, coping styles as a response to emotions has been widely examined throughout literature (Easter & Parker, 1990; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; McCrae & Costa Jr., 1986). Two major styles of coping have been identified, namely emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Problem-focused coping strategies are often used in situations where the stressor is viewed as changeable, resulting the individual to take action and remove oneself from the events causing stress. Whereas emotional-focused coping is seen in situations that are perceived as unchangeable, i.e. seeking emotional support or self-blame (Alwin, Folkman, Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1980).

Participant Demographics

Participants (N = 151) were recruited from various undergraduate psychology courses at the University of Bridgeport, in exchange for extra credit. The participants filled out a 42 page survey via pencil and paper in one sitting that took approximately 75 minutes. For students whose second language was English, they were allotted extra time and allowed to use translators when requested. Of the sample, 14.2% of the participants were international students. Self-reported Ethnicity was the following: 44% African American, 28% Hispanic/Latino, 23% White, 14% Asian, and 12% Other/Not Disclosing.

Results

Table 1. ANOVA results comparing high vs. low social isolation on coping style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coping Style</th>
<th>High Social Isolation</th>
<th>Low Social Isolation</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Coping</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral Disengagement</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitutional Blame</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.048</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative reframing</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

• Results indicated that higher Social Isolation was associated with significantly lower utilization of Active Coping, Emotional Support, Humor, while indicating more use of Behavioral Disengagement as well as Self-Blame, all less than p<.05. The remaining coping styles; Positive Reinforcement, Planning, Acceptance, Religion, Self-Distraction, Denial, Substance Abuse, Instrumental Social Support, and Vventing were all non-significant.

• While only some of the coping styles were impacted, those that were impacted showed the expected pattern of change:
  • Higher levels of active coping (which is good) was associated with low perceived social isolation.
  • Higher levels of perceived emotional support (which is good) was associated with low perceived social isolation.
  • Higher levels of behavioral disengagement (which is bad) was associated with high perceived social isolation.
  • Lower levels of use of humor (which is bad) was associated with high perceived social isolation.
  • Higher levels of self-blame (which is bad) was associated with high perceived social isolation.

Limitations and Future Directions

• While the present study cannot determine if these styles of coping are a cause of higher perceived social isolation, or a consequence of higher perceived social isolation, it is easy to surmise that these differences are impacting overall well being (ex: having less humor or perceiving less emotional support can have negative ramifications)
• Future work should examine how and why these changes are occurring and establish which came first between perceived isolation and coping.

Conclusion

• These findings provide an initial exploration of how those with higher perceived social isolation may utilize different styles of coping, to deal with the stressors they encounter in life.
• Additionally, these findings help inform future research exploring how these changes in coping style impact other measures such as physical and mental health, and factors such as positive adjustment to college.