Health and Disability

Work-related stress and well-being: The roles of direct action coping and palliative coping

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The purpose of the present study is to analyze the roles of direct action coping and palliative coping in the relationship between work stressors and psychological well-being, as well as their possible interactions, in a sample of 464 bank employees. Hierarchical regression analyses showed main effects of direct action coping on well-being. Palliative coping predicts higher levels of psychological distress. Contrary to what was expected, the interactions between work stressors and direct action coping were not significant. Palliative coping interacted with work stressors when predicting psychosomatic complaints. The interaction between the two types of coping was significant on psychosomatic complaints and psychological distress, but not on job satisfaction. The paper discusses theoretical and practical implications of these results, in order to design intervention strategies to prevent and manage job stress.

Key words: Work stress, direct action coping, palliative coping, interaction between coping strategies, well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, a growing interest in work-related stress has arisen in scientific research. Nowadays, the negative relationships between work stressors and physical and psychological well-being seem to be well established (for a review, see Schabracq, Winnubst & Cooper, 2003); stress contributes to increasing psychosomatic and psychosocial distress, absenteeism, turnover and productivity losses (Sonntag & Frese, 2003). However, situations are not inherently stressful, and psychological, physical and/or behavioral responses to stressors are the result of the interaction between individual and situation (Sutherland & Cooper, 1988). In this way, the coping strategies seem to play an important role in determining the results and/or consequences of the stressors (e.g., Day & Livingstone, 2001; Eriksen & Ursin, 1999; Greenglass, 2003). The main interest of the present study is to examine the interactive relationships between coping and work stressors, while paying special attention to the interrelationships between coping strategies.

A variety of typologies of coping strategies have been proposed in the literature. In general, they can be summarized in a bi-dimensional dichotomy: the first part (direct action, problem-focused, active, control) has been referred to as “attempts to respond to a situation of threat with the aim of removing the threat”, whereas the second part of the dichotomy (palliative, emotion-focused, passive, avoidance) has been referred to as “reducing the emotional discomfort”. Following Dewe (1989) and the first distinction by Lazarus (1975), we will refer to the dichotomy as direct action and palliative. Problem-focused and emotion-focused are their respective synonyms, and they will be referred to in this way throughout the text.

Empirical research has shown that active or problem-focused coping is linked to increases in job satisfaction (Burke, 1998; Rick & Guppy, 1994) and decreases in anxiety and psychological distress (Hobfoll, Dunahoo, Ben-Porath & Monnier, 1999; Grossi, 1999). With regard to palliative or emotion-focused coping, the studies show contradictory findings: some studies find that palliative coping reduces somatic symptoms and psychological distress (e.g. Parkes, 1990), and others report evidence of increases in psychological distress and psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., Day & Livingstone, 2001; Smäri, Arason, Hafsteinsson & Ingimarsson, 1997).

In addition, the coping literature points to a lack of clarity about coping’s moderating role between stressors and their outcomes. Some studies have supported this moderating effect (e.g., Day & Livingstone, 2001; Eriksen & Ursin, 1999), whereas others have provided weak support for it (Bhagat, Allie & Ford, 1995; Greenglass, Burke & Ondrack, 1990), and a third group has found no support at all for the interactive model (Leiter, 1991; Rick & Guppy, 1994). Studies supporting the moderating role of coping have shown that direct action strategies moderate the relationship between excessive work demands and positive outcomes, like job satisfaction (Koeske, Kirk & Koeske, 1993), and negative outcomes, like somatic and affective symptoms (Eriksen & Ursin, 1999; Koeske et al., 1993; Parkes, 1990), psychological