

Mini-EdPsych Q & A – Dr. Nathan Smith

Coping:

Managing the apparently unmanageable

April 30, 2009

Is there a difference in the way men and women cope with stress?

Evidence regarding sex differences in coping is mixed. Some research has revealed that there are no differences between men and women, whereas other research has found differences. Among studies that have found sex differences, women tend to report more emotion-oriented coping (e.g., venting, expressing emotions to others) and utilization of social support while men tend to report both more active coping and more avoidant coping. The most robust difference appears to be in the degree to which individuals make use of social support. Theories of gender-role socialization point out that women tend to be socialized to be more connected to others, while men are socialized to be more independent. Given that the research evidence is mixed, it is important to note that there are often more pronounced within-group differences than there are between-group differences. That is, person A is likely to be different from person B because they are different people rather than because they are of different sexes. So it is difficult to say that “women do this” but “men do that.”

How does one encourage people to join a support group, when they see it as a weakness?

Support groups have been shown to be powerful tools in helping people overcome a wide variety of problems. Support groups are helpful for myriad reasons. Some of these reasons include feeling supported and understood, receiving helpful feedback on interpersonal skills and interactions, benefiting from a broad pool of knowledge, learning from others, not feeling alone, and expressing emotions. In some cases, a group setting can be even more powerful than individual counseling. It is normal to feel nervous about joining a group and sharing personal information with strangers. Precisely because it is so normal, the other people in the group are most likely feeling the same way. People new to support groups are often surprised by how comfortable they feel once they've become a part of the group. Asking for help takes courage. Thus, joining a group is in no way a sign of weakness. Rather it is a sign of strength that someone cares enough about herself or himself to get better.

What part can pets play in coping and stress reduction?

Pet ownership has been shown to have a beneficial effect on psychological and physical well-being, especially among older individuals. Several studies have shown that having a pet not only increases mood but also increases longevity, reduces illness, lowers blood pressure, and increases adherence to medical treatment. Pets can provide companionship, unconditional acceptance, support, and love, and can give their owners a feeling of responsibility and meaning in life.