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14: Self-Determination, Coping, and Development

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"Don't follow me, follow you."
Nietzsche

All people's lives include obstacles, troubles, failures, and loss. How people deal with adversity—how they cope—influences the impact these events have on them, not only in terms of momentary emotional states or the resolution of specific stressful episodes, but also cumulatively in their long-term mental and physical health. Because coping is so central to processes of adjustment and thriving, much research has been devoted to analyzing the factors that allow people to cope more adaptively.

From that body of research, consensus has emerged that two factors are central in shaping how people cope. They are a sense of control and social support. Research across the lifespan shows that a person's sense of control over desired and undesired outcomes is a powerful ally in times of stress (Folkman, 1984). People who are convinced of their own efficacy at overcoming obstacles are more likely to appraise failures and stressors as challenges, to cope using problem-solving and strategizing, and to persevere and remain optimistic in the face of obstacles. In contrast, people who believe themselves to be incompetent tend to panic and show confusion when faced with setbacks, to become pessimistic and doubting, to ruminate and lose concentration, to escape the stressor if possible, and to

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expect the worst about future stressful encounters (Bandura, 1997; Compas, Banex, Malcarne, & Worsham, 1991; Dweck, 1999; Flammer, 1995; Folkman, 1984; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Peterson, Maier, & Seligman, 1993; Skinner, 1995; Weiner, 1986).

The second major predictor of coping is social support. People who have close, loving relationships fare better during stress than individuals who are more socially isolated or who have conflictual personal relationships. Social support has been shown to act as a buffer against psychological distress and has been linked to such positive outcomes as lower rates of depression, decreased loneliness, and a more positive self-image (Cohen, Sherrod, & Clark, 1986; Lepore, 1992; Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1991, 1996; Reis & Franks, 1994; Sarason et al., 1991; Windle, 1992). Attachment theory suggests that the proximal predictors of coping are individuals' experiences of social relationships as supportive (Bretherton, 1985) and points out that close relationships can therefore either promote or undermine coping, depending on how they are experienced. Although the connections among attachment, social support, and control are not completely clarified, their importance to coping is nevertheless documented by decades of research.

The goal of this chapter is to argue that there is an important set of psychological processes, in addition to those captured by attachment and perceived control, that are central to the study of coping—namely, processes of autonomy. Autonomy refers to the need to express one's authentic self and to experience that self as the source of action. It is hypothesized to underlie processes of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1987, 1991, 1995). At the present time, the contribution of autonomy to the study of stress and coping is not fully realized. However, we review research on self-determination as well as on infancy, temperament, volition, self-regulation, and aging that points to the critical functions of autonomy during stressful transactions with the environment.

Throughout the chapter, we also emphasize that processes of coping reciprocally shape autonomy. Coping episodes in which goals are blocked or in which competing goals cannot be met, mark transactions of potential significance to the development of autonomy. We argue that the contributions of stress and coping to the study of autonomy have not yet been fully explored, and we hold that a focus on self-determination and coping can be mutually informative, potentially adding richness to conceptualizations and research in both areas.

**Overview of the Chapter**

We begin by providing background from self-determination theory about autonomy as a fundamental human need, about the self-system processes connected to autonomy, and about the social contexts that support versus undermine their development. The majority of the chapter focuses on the role of autonomy
in coping. Specifically, we argue that self-systems and social supports connected with autonomy are primary determinants of how people deal with stress, that a focus on autonomy reveals several ways of coping that are not often distinguished in current taxonomies of coping, that autonomy plays a critical role in moment-to-moment coping interactions, and that constructs of autonomy are useful in characterizing the long-term regulatory capacities and relationship qualities that link coping to development.

also show how the addition of autonomy to the current focus on social support and control can clarify several issues in the coping area, including the role of secondary control, the adaptiveness of approach versus avoidance coping, and intentionality in coping. Although our arguments emphasize that autonomy matters to coping, we also wish to highlight the reciprocal connection, namely, that coping matters to autonomy. More specifically, coping marks the site of transactions that influence the development of the self-system processes and relationship qualities associated with autonomy. Because our goal is to add autonomy to conceptualizations of coping and not to replace constructs of social support, attachment, efficacy, or control, we begin by describing a motivational model which incorporates work from all these areas.

The Motivational Model

The motivational model is an action-theoretical account of motivation, and its goal is to provide a framework for explaining psychological sources of energized and directed action. The basic model, depicted graphically in Figure 14.1, integrates work on attachment, perceived control, and self-determination. It does so by assuming that each reflects the study of a basic psychological need—namely, the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985a, 2000; Skinner, 1991). This assumption is shared by researchers from many areas, as can be seen in numerous chapters within the current volume.

According to the model, social contexts within different enterprises (e.g., family, work, daycare, school) differentially provide people with opportunities to fulfill their fundamental psychological needs. From these experiences, individuals construct and revise self-system processes organized around relatedness, competence, and autonomy. These self-system processes in turn guide people’s participation in the activities of the enterprise, including their coping.

Central to this model is the notion of “patterns of action.” Engaged versus disaffected patterns of action are primary consequences of motivational processes (Wellborn, 1991). Ongoing engagement refers to active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused interactions with the social and physical envi-
Figure 14.1. A Motivational Model of Context, Self, Action, and Outcomes.

Environments. In contrast, patterns of action are described as disaffected when individuals are emotionally alienated or behaviorally disengaged from participation in an enterprise. Coping describes patterns of action when ongoing engagement encounters resistance or is disrupted. Energetic resources (effort, executive capacity, ego resources) are required to regulate actions. Action regulation under stress is considered "coping." Engagement and coping are critical mechanisms through which motivational processes influence the quality of self-systems and social relationships and, over time, shape development.

Relatedness and Competence as Fundamental Psychological Needs

Within the literatures on attachment and control, it is not particularly controversial to assert that infants are born with psychological needs, that is, with a predisposition to be attracted to, interested in, and responsive to certain kinds of stimulation or experiences. It is assumed that motivational proclivities are based in physiology and that they are evolutionarily adaptive, in that they predispose infants (and people in general) to attend and respond to certain important classes of interactions with the social and physical environments (Barrett & Campos, 1991).
The attachment perspective is founded on the assumption that normal infants are born with the capacity and desire to detect, seek out, initiate, and take pleasure from interactions with social partners and to protest and defend against separation (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973; Papousek & Papousek, 1980). In the attachment area, it is assumed that infants’ cries and clinging (and caregiver comforting and protection) are part of a mutually adaptive system that is physiologically-based and that directs attention, behavior, and emotion. In the motivational model, the need to experience oneself as connected to other people, as belonging, is referred to as relatedness. The “need to belong” has been documented across the lifespan (Baldwin, 1992; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Weiner, 1991).

Competence refers to the need to experience oneself as effective in one’s interactions with the social and physical environments. It is hypothesized to underlie processes of control (Bandura, 1997; Peterson et al., 1993; Weiner, 1986). Within work on perceived control, a group of theorists argue that infants are born with the capacity and desire to create effects in the environment. This “human tendency” has been referred to as effectance motivation (Harter, 1978; White, 1959) or competence motivation (Koestner & McClelland, 1990). Research has demonstrated that infants are innately willing and able to detect, initiate, operate, prolong, and enjoy contingent interactions and that they show distress and frustration when faced with noncontingency (Watson, 1966; Watson & Ramey, 1972). The psychophysiological basis of reactions to noncontingency has been documented (Gunnar, 1980) and provides one explanation for why prolonged exposure to noncontingency is stressful and can compromise immune system functioning (Seilgeman, 1975). These effects have also been documented across the lifespan (J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Skinner, 1995). A goal of the motivational model is to bring together the consideration of both of these needs simultaneously and to posit the inclusion of a somewhat more controversial third fundamental psychological need—that for autonomy.

**Autonomy as a Fundamental Psychological Need**

A basic tenet of self-determination theory is that all people intrinsically desire to be autonomous, that is, they innately desire to act according to their genuine desires and preferences, to show courses of action that reflect their true selves, and to experience themselves as the source of their own actions (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985a, 1991, 2000). It is clear that, from birth, infants are able to vigorously express and defend their states, actions, desires, and preferences, and that they protest restraint and pressure to act counter to their desires. Stated colloquially, infants do not need to be told “No, tell me what you really want.”

An autonomy perspective highlights the implications of these intrinsic abilities and motivations, pointing out that infants are born with the capacity and will
to be autonomous. That is, all infants come with genuine preferences, desires, and wants, and they are innately able and motivated to recognize them and to show actions that express them. In fact, these patterns of expression are clear enough to allow experienced caregivers to respond to infants’ actions appropriately, that is, in concert with infants’ actual desires. Social interactions in which caregivers respond appropriately to infants’ expressed wants and desires are psychologically and physiologically beneficial to infants, contributing to the development of intentionality, expressiveness, and personality (Zeedyk, 1996).

The assumption that normal humans come with the need for self-determination does not preclude individual differences in corresponding inborn capacities and desires. For example, individual differences in emotional expressiveness and resistance to demands have been studied in work on temperament and emotion regulation (Calkins, 1994). Individual differences in expressions of autonomy are also influenced by the characteristics of the different social contexts in which children and adults function and develop.

The Construction of Self-system Processes Associated with Autonomy

Like researchers in the areas of self-determination, we believe that people are inherently expressive and volitional. In addition, and in keeping with work from many areas, we assume that individuals act on the motivations provided by psychological needs in social contexts that are differentially responsive to them (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Skinner, 1995). During these social interactions, people experience themselves as differentially related, competent, and autonomous.

From these experiences, individuals cumulatively construct and revise views of themselves and their social/physical worlds, referred to as self-system processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). These beliefs are not momentary self-perceptions. They are relatively durable convictions about the nature of the self and the world. Because self-system processes guide participation in and interpretation of subsequent social interactions, they help create compelling experiences of “apparent reality” (Fridja, 1988).

For autonomy, self-system processes have been studied as autonomy or goal orientations (deCharms, 1968; Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1991; Dweck, 1991; Kuhl, 1987; Ryan & Connell, 1989), and contain views about the self as genuine (versus inauthentic) and about the environment as encouraging open expression of genuine preferences (versus being coercive). Based on a history of experience with differential autonomy support versus coercion, people develop an orientation toward their own goals and actions, which becomes a critical individual difference factor shaping their motivation and participation. These orientations have been described and measured in a variety of ways, including origin versus
paw (deCharms, 1968); intrinsic versus extrinsic orientations (Harter, 1978); learning versus performance goals (Dweck, 1999; Dweck & Leggett, 1988); and self-regulatory styles (including external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic regulation; Ryan & Connell, 1989).

Social Contexts and the Construction of Self-system Processes

The model attempts to describe how social and physical contexts provide people with opportunities to fulfill their needs (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Skinner, 1995). Accordingly, people are given opportunities to experience themselves as related and belonging when they interact with social partners who love them, who are involved and emotionally available, and who express affection, warmth, caring, and nurturance. When social partners are hostile or neglectful, individuals experience themselves as unlovable and the context as unavailable or untrustworthy (Ainsworth, 1979; Lamb & Easterbrooks, 1981). People accumulate experiences of competence when they interact with contexts that respond to them, and that are structured, predictable, contingent, and consistent. When contexts, partners, or activities are noncontingent, uncontrollable, or chaotic, people will come to experience themselves as incompetent (Bandura, 1981; Carton & Nowicki, 1994; Gunnar, 1980; Schneewind, 1995; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998; Suomi, 1980).

Support of autonomy. Opportunities to experience oneself as autonomous are facilitated by contexts that are autonomously supportive (Deci & Ryan, 1987, 1991; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; Ryan, 1982; Ryan & Solky, 1996). Adults and children experience themselves as autonomous when they interact with social partners or institutions who respect and defer to them, allowing them freedom of expression and action, and encouraging them to attend to, accept, and value their inner states, preferences, and desires.

Definitions of autonomy support, for example in parenting, tend to focus on the absence of psychological control or coercion (Barber, 1996). However, support for autonomy extends beyond allowing an individual freedom of choice and expression, to providing genuine respect and deference and encouraging individuals to actively discover, explore, and articulate their own views, goals, and preferences. Autonomy support characterizes interactions in which people are expected to express their views and opinions and in which these are given weight in decision-making and problem-solving. Social partners can participate actively in this process through attempts to help the individual become aware of, reflect on, and express his or her true feelings, intentions, and desires. This is especially important with children and in situations when feelings are opaque or confusing. Explanations that are accurate and that validate the person’s perspective can provide the person insight into his or her own goals and personality (for reviews, see Barber, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Reeve et al., 1999).
Autonomy supportive contexts can be distinguished from "permissive" contexts on several grounds. A permissive style, often used to refer to styles of parenting, describes a warm but laissez-faire approach to interactions, which sometimes implies lax discipline, few maturity demands, benign neglect, or low structure (Baumrind, 1971, 1977). Autonomy support includes the freedom from coercion implied by such an interaction style; however, an autonomy supportive context is considered to be more involved and active in facilitating the development of individuality. The goal of autonomy supportive partners is not to leave the person alone, but to actively participate in interactions in which the individual discovers and expresses his or her true self.

Coercion. The opposite of autonomy support is coercion or controlling social conditions (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 1991; Ryan, 1982; Ryan & Solky, 1996). When social partners or contexts are coercive, pressuring, or controlling, individuals experience themselves as "pawns" (deCharms, 1968). Coercion can be conveyed through many channels. The most obvious is direct exertion of force, through threats, intimidation, or emotional blackmail. However, social contexts can also be coercive if they are characterized by excessive rules, rigid prescriptions of behavior, or demands for conformity. A social partner's strong emotion, such as intense anger or anxiety, can deflect an individual away from a genuinely desired course of action. Even well-intentioned social contexts can be coercive if they are overprotective, intrusively helpful, or insistently directive. These contextual features tend to focus people on what "should" be happening and away from their intrinsic involvement in tasks or activities (Dweck, 1999; Ryan, 1982).

A critical issue in defining the nature of coercive contexts is the distinction between "informational" and "controlling" responses to one's actions (Ryan, 1982). Many kinds of social reactions, such as praise, feedback, rewards, or evaluations, cannot be classified a priori as autonomy supportive or coercive. For example, not all praise can be considered autonomy supportive nor all rewards coercive. Instead, it depends on the quality of the reactions, specifically whether the social response provides (or is experienced as providing) information that would be helpful to improved performance (informational) or, alternatively, exerts pressure to engage in certain actions (coercive). Social feedback can be "purely" informational when it contains no pressure to carry out specific actions or it can be "purely" coercive if it contains only an imperative and no information; and, of course, some reactions contain both information and pressure.

However, it has been possible to distinguish empirically the features of social messages that make them more coercive (including linguistic features like "should" or "must") from those that make them more informative (specific descriptions of actions and their consequences), and these features have been linked in the expected manner to individuals' perceptions of autonomy support and to their autonomous action (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994; Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Reeve et al., 1999). Theoretically, informational feedback can be seen as part of structure, which supports experiences of compe-
A Motivational Model of Stress and Coping

The motivational model has been used as a springboard for addressing basic issues in stress and coping, such as: What kinds of experiences are objectively and universally stressful? What are the contents of appraisals of challenge and threat? Why are behavioral and emotional reactions to stress so powerful and compelling? What kind(s) of coping are adaptive? What kinds of personal and social resources can support adaptive coping? (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994, 1997; Skinner & Edge, 1998, in press).

The assumption of fundamental psychological needs adds content to theories of coping. It provides an explanation for why certain experiences are objectively stressful: because they challenge or threaten universal human needs. The model suggests that appraisals of situations as challenges or threats to the three needs are key mechanisms by which objective stressors trigger energized and compelling emotional and behavioral reactions. It explains why self-system processes, such as perceived control and feelings of connectedness to others, exert such powerful effects during times of stress: because they shape the “apparent reality” of objective events. It also suggests that social contexts which support the three needs can have positive effects on appraisals and coping as well. Two interesting implications from the motivational model are the definition of coping as “action regulation under stress” and the suggestion that ways of coping may be organized as “families” around the three needs.

Coping as Action Regulation

When coping is thought of as action regulation under stress, it implies that coping is based on action tendencies. These are flexible motor programs that include behavior, emotion, and orientation responses (Barrett & Campos, 1991; Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994; Fridja, 1987, 1988). Action tendencies are not reflexes; however, they are compelling, automatized predispositions to act. They are experienced as “urges” or “desires,” and are redundantly energized and directed by behavior, emotion, and orientation.
Action tendencies are goal directed and effortful (in that they require energetic resources) but are not usually voluntary, in the sense of being under conscious control (cf., Compas, Connor, Osowiecki, & Welch, 1997). According to this reasoning, when a man feels pressured, he doesn’t “decide” to lash out; he “finds himself” digging his heels in. This holds not only for maladaptive but also for adaptive responses to stress. For example, when a girl appraises a problem as challenging, she doesn’t “decide” to problem solve; her attention and interest are “captured” by the problematic interaction.

Figure 14.2. A Depiction of Coping as Action Regulation under Stress.

In keeping with action theory and functionalist theories of emotion, we hold that action tendencies are triggered by an appreciation of the significance of an interaction for an individual’s well-being (Barrett & Campos, 1991; Campos et al., 1994; Fridja, 1987, 1988). We view individuals’ appraisals of challenges and threats to the three needs as prototypical examples of the kinds of appreciations that trigger action tendencies. It is these action tendencies that are the targets of people’s regulation under stress. As depicted in Figure 14-2, coping can be seen as an action tendency (represented by the smaller dark arrow), triggered by an appraisal and shaped by a regulation (represented by the larger dashed arrow), that is embedded in a specific context and a set of social relationships. It can be noted that the arrows representing the action tendency and the regulation are
pointed in opposite directions in Figure 4-2. This suggests that, in this example, the function of the regulation is not to boost the action tendency (as would be suggested by arrows pointing in the same direction), but to redirect it. Many alternative combinations of action tendency and regulation are also possible.

**Six Families of Coping**

The motivational model was useful in identifying and organizing categories of coping. Three concepts were particularly important in this endeavor: the notion of “families” of ways of coping, the concept of action tendencies, and the three self-system processes. The notion of families allows multiple manifestly different ways of coping to be considered part of the same family based on common underlying characteristics. For example, such diverse ways of coping as reading about a disease, joining a support group, seeking advice from a friend, and watching a peer group could be classified as belonging to the family of coping characterized as “information-seeking.” This scheme acknowledges that ways of coping can be infinitely adapted according to the specifics of a stressful encounter—demands, contexts, personalities, and developmental levels—without requiring an infinite number of categories to meaningfully capture them.

The concept of “action tendencies” was useful in specifying the criteria for family membership, namely, the underlying root action tendency: All members of a family have in common the underlying urge or desire triggered by a particular appraisal of the stressful encounter, and the prototypical pattern of behavior, emotion, and orientation which characterizes that action tendency. They take their specific form from the developmental capacities and the situational possibilities available during the stressful episode (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2002). For example, if the root action tendency in response to an appraisal of coercion is aggression, then that action tendency will be implemented directly (i.e., expressed as coping) only if certain developmental capacities are present (e.g., after a child can intentionally hit), and only in certain contexts (e.g., ones that allow the child to aggress). With social partners against whom the child is not allowed to aggress (e.g., the teacher), the child will have to express the action tendency of fighting indirectly, through oppositional behavior, displaced aggression, or fantasy. Or an uncoordinated infant may “fight” through temper tantrums.

The three self-system processes were used to identify six families of coping (see Figure 4-3). For each of the self-systems, one family is organized around the root action tendency triggered by an appraisal of obstacles as a challenge to that need and one is organized around the root action tendency triggered by an appraisal of threat. These six families are depicted in Figure 4-3, along with the corresponding behavior, emotion, and orientation. For example, when an obstacle is appraised as resistance, that is, as a challenge to autonomy, then this triggers the root action tendency of defense, which is characterized by behavior that
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological Need</th>
<th>Environmental Event/ Appraisal</th>
<th>Action Tendency</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relatedness</td>
<td>Separation</td>
<td>Seek proximity</td>
<td>Go to other</td>
<td>Yearning</td>
<td>Make contact Away (to other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Freeze</td>
<td>Hold still</td>
<td>Shock</td>
<td>Disappear Toward (inward)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Novelty</td>
<td>Observe</td>
<td>Study</td>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Discover Toward (object)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chaos</td>
<td>Flee</td>
<td>Run away</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Escape Away (outward)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td>Defend</td>
<td>Stand firm</td>
<td>Indignation</td>
<td>Protect Away (to obstacle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coercion</td>
<td>Fight</td>
<td>Move toward obstacle</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Attack Toward (to object)</td>
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**Figure 14.3.** Ways of Coping and Their Root Action Tendencies.
stands firm, the emotion of indignation, and an orientation toward protecting the desired goal. In contrast, an appraisal of a stressful encounter as coercion, that is, as a threat to autonomy, triggers an action tendency that can be labeled as “fight,” characterized by a prototypical pattern of behavior (moving toward the obstacle), emotion (anger), and orientation (attacking the source of coercion).

Development of Coping Capacity

This conceptualization of coping makes clear that “stress” is not inherently damaging to people, even children, and that the primary function of coping is not simply to shield people from stressful experiences (Compas, 1993; Weisz, 1993). Coping can function to prolong constructive interactions as well as to escalate stress. If demands are a true threat and overwhelm a person, then the person becomes confused, isolated, or rebellious, and these experiences are counterproductive. However, if situations are experienced as challenging, they can contribute to development.

In fact, stress and challenges are necessary conditions for the construction of children’s self-system processes and their close relationships. For example, it is precisely by dealing with situations in which goals are blocked or in conflict with the goals of others that people develop autonomy. During prolonged negotiations with environmental demands, people learn about their own genuine goals and preferences and learn how to respect and influence those of others. They learn how to coordinate and balance conflicting goals, for example, how to shape short-term actions in service of long-term goals (Metcalf & Mischel, 1999). Such conflicts, negotiations, and concessions characterize the very processes of internalization, through which originally extrinsic goals become integrated with the true self and hence autonomously regulated (Deci & Ryan, 1991; Kochanska, 1995; Ryan, 1993). Constructive coping interactions are key loci of development, representing opportunities for people to discover and expand their own capacities and to learn about and shape the affordances of the physical and social environment.

Autonomy as Central to Coping

It is relatively easy to map concepts from the areas of control and attachment onto fundamental issues in coping. For example, work on control, efficacy, and helplessness (Compas, 1987; Dweck & Wortman, 1982; Skinner, 1995) holds that “uncontrollability” is an objective stressor that universally places significant demands on people. This perspective suggests that a sense of efficacy is a critical
psychological resource in dealing with uncontrollable situations, because it affects whether such events will be appraised as challenges to competence and so coped with through problem-solving, strategizing, and information-seeking, or, alternatively, will be appraised as threats and so lead to confusion, helplessness, or escape (Dweck, 1999; Peterson et al., 1993).

Likewise, it is relatively easy to see how the tenets of attachment theory can inform work on coping (Compas, 1987; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). According to an attachment perspective (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973), separation is objectively demanding, personal resources are appraisals of availability of attachment figures in times of distress, and social resources include a secure attachment. Appraisals of stressful situations as a challenge to relatedness are likely to trigger proximity-seeking and self-reliance, whereas appraisals of stressful encounters as threats trigger social isolation or excessive dependency.

Compared to work on attachment and control, much less has been written and studied about the connection between coping and autonomy. Nevertheless, self-determination theory can provide a complementary set of answers to fundamental questions of coping. This perspective suggests that a class of universally stressful events are ones that are objectively coercive; an important psychological resource for dealing with demands is a sense of autonomy; and autonomy support is an important social resource. These resources increase the likelihood that objective stressors will be appraised as challenges rather than as threats to autonomy. Self-determination theory also suggests that several important ways of coping (patterns of action regulation) are organized around the need for autonomy. Since these propositions are rarely considered in research on coping, each of them is analyzed in more detail below.

**Coercion as an Objective Stressor**

Current theories of stress and coping tend to back away from the notion of “universal stressors.” That is, for the most part, conceptualizations decline to identify any particular experience or class of experiences as objectively demanding to all people. Instead, stress is described as transactional, that is, as shaped jointly by environmental demands, individuals’ appraisals, and personal and social resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The only two conditions that have come close to being considered universally stressful are noncontingency (Seligman, 1975) or loss of control (Miller, 1979) and social deprivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Schut, 1996) or loss of an attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1969, 1973).

The consideration of actual loss of control and actual loss of attachment figures as universally stressful has been useful in analyzing a
wide variety of life events for their objective demand characteristics and for the kinds of distress and coping they tend to elicit. For example, the centrality of loss of attachment figures has informed work on maternal deprivation (Rutter, 1979), bereavement (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999), and dealing with social losses during normative aging (Carstensen, 1998). Other work focuses on the objective controllability of stressors. For example, it has been suggested that traumatic events such as life-threatening illness, divorce, natural disasters, violent crime, abuse, and even aging, are stressful at least in part because they entail objective losses of competence and control. The extent of the objective loss of control turns out to be a good indicator of many sequelae of the event, including subjective experiences of loss of control, emotional distress, behavioral disorganization, and the kinds of coping evinced (Band & Weisz, 1988; Compas et al., 1991; Folkman, 1984; Forsythe & Compas, 1987; Weisz, 1993).

The motivational model underscores the universal stressfulness of both loss of attachment figures and loss of control. It posits that these are direct assaults on fundamental human needs, and that all people are psychologically and physiologically predisposed to register their stressfulness. In addition, the model posits a third class of universally stressful experiences: coercion or loss of freedom. These experiences are also considered to thwart a universal human need, in this case, for autonomy. However, in analyses of life events, coercion is rarely mentioned as a source of stress. Further, many of the life events described as entailing losses of or threats to control or attachment relationships, also contain coercive features and the coerciveness of these experiences may add to or even outweigh the effects of other losses or threats.

Coercive crimes. Once the concept of coercion is articulated, it is relatively easy to identify some classes of life events that are stressful primarily because they are coercive. For example, violent crimes, such as robbery or rape, are defined by the very coerciveness of the acts. The same activities performed consensually do not involve violence and are not even considered crimes. That is not to say that victimization never entails loss of control or threats to relationships, but only to emphasize that such incidents always include the experience of overwhelming coercion and violation of will.

Coercive medical conditions. Another clear illustration of the importance (and neglect) of the characteristic of coercion can be drawn from work on coping with life-threatening illness. Research on coping with medical conditions often focuses almost exclusively on the controllability of the disease, sometimes even classifying and studying conditions separately according to the extent to which symptoms or diseases respond to treatment. We argue that an additional dimension is critical in determining the stressfulness of a medical condition, namely, its coerciveness, defined as the extent to which it prevents people from showing the actions they desire. For example, diseases that interfere with activities of daily living or are disabling may or may not respond to treatment, but they are coercive. They prevent people from doing what they want to do (such as playing tennis)
and they also pressure people into doing things that they do not want to do (such as staying in bed). Effective treatments may not only restore control but may also reduce the coerciveness of symptoms.

It should be noted, however, that treatments can themselves be coercive. They can involve submitting to diagnostic procedures or regimens that are painful or invasive. They can include taking medications with harmful side effects or participating in therapies that are painful or boring. They can also include adding undesired or refraining from desired activities. In most cases, the stressfulness of both medical conditions and their treatments can be appreciated, not only in terms of loss of control, but also with reference to coercion.

Coerciveness in life events. We believe that it is useful to evaluate all stressful life events in terms of their coerciveness. For some events, like victimization, abuse, or disease, issues of coercion may be a defining feature. For others, a consideration of coercion may add depth to an understanding of the psychological demands presented by an event. For example, the stressfulness of bereavement and divorce may be characterized primarily in terms of losses or threats to attachment relationships. However, loss of a partner may also be coercive if it forces the remaining partner into new roles and actions. Divorce may be more coercive (and hence more upsetting) if the target individual (partner or child) does not want it and it occurs against his or her will. Likewise, a dominant theme in aging may be loss of competencies and loss of relationships. However, freedom may also be lost, as a result of or in addition to these other losses. Analysis of the coerciveness of life events can provide insight into subjective experiences and reactions to these events, as well as suggesting interventions to ameliorate or buffer their effects.

Coercion versus loss of control. Part of the problem with characterizing experiences in terms of their coerciveness is the difficulty in distinguishing coercion from loss of control (Skinner, 1956). Some of this confusion is terminological. For example, work on control has adopted concepts like “decision control” (Averill, 1973) and “secondary control” (J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995) to refer to processes that typically have been dealt with in theories of self-determination. At the same time, self-determination theorists have used terms like “locus of causality” (deCharms, 1968) and characterize conditions, contexts, and events that thwart autonomy as “controlling” (Ryan, 1982).

Conceptually, however, the difference is clear (deCharms, 1981). Loss of control refers to the loss or absence of action-outcome contingencies, as described by terms like noncontingency, unpredictability, and (our preferred umbrella concept) chaos. Chaotic contexts prevent people from being effective or masterful, and from producing desired or preventing undesired outcomes. They either prevent people from figuring out what to do to get what they want or they block people from obtaining the competencies to do it. In some general way, chaos can be thought of as similar to “anarchy” (and can be contrasted to the rule of law).
In contrast, coercion refers to loss of freedom, or resistance to showing the actions of one’s choice, as described by terms like pressure, force, interference, manipulation, or intrusiveness. Coercive contexts prevent people from being genuine and authentic, from expressing the actions that reflect their actual preferences and desires. In simple terms, they prevent people from being true to themselves. Coercion can be thought of as similar to a “totalitarian” system (and can be contrasted with democracy).

Contexts can be very structurec in that they are contingent and predictable, but if they also contain pressure to produce particular outcomes or if only certain classes of (undesired) actions are effective, they can also be very coercive. Many life events and many contexts (such as work places, families, and schools) can be characterized by this combination of conditions. For example, parental approval may be contingent on a child’s conformity to parental desires (Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998), or evaluations of teachers may be linked to the performance of their students (Deci, Spiegel, Ryan, Koestner, & Kauffman, 1982). Even though such contexts are high on opportunities to control outcomes, they are still stressful because of their negative effects on autonomy. And, of course, contexts that are both chaotic and coercive should be more stressful than contexts that exhibit only one of these characteristics.

**Self-system Processes of Autonomy as Motivational Determinants of Coping**

Adaptive self-system processes are hypothesized to act as key personal resources during stressful interactions. At the most general level, they contribute, along with objective events (including the actions of social partners), to an orientation toward the stressful transaction. They create “head sets” about what is at stake in stressful interactions, influencing what people focus on as they cope. These are reflected in appraisals of the meaning of internal and external demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), including, for example, what is attended to, how interactions are interpreted, estimations of their potential impact on current well-being and future goals, and views about the role of the self and others in dealing with the stressful situation.

Each of the self-system processes shapes appraisals that trigger corresponding families of coping. The families of coping associated with competence and relatedness, namely, problem-solving and support-seeking, respectively, have been studied fairly thoroughly and appear in almost all typologies of ways of coping (Ryan-Wenger, 1992; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Moreover, the self-system processes of competence and relatedness have often been included in studies of coping and have been found to predict their designated ways of coping. For example, perceived control is a robust predictor of problem-solving, active, and approach coping in children (Compas et al., 1991; Kliwer, 1991) and across the
lifespan (Skinner, 1995). And studies that examine coping as a function of attachment status have found that children with secure attachments (relative to children who are insecurely attached) show more active, approach, and support-seeking coping (Armsden & Greenberg; 1987; Nachmias, Gunnar, Mangelsdorf, Parritz, & Buss, 1996; Shulman, 1987; Skinner & Edge, in press; Skinner & Snyder, 1999).

Compared to studies on perceived control and attachment status, almost no research has explored the effects of the third self-system process, namely, perceived autonomy. Furthermore, the ways of coping associated with autonomy are often missing from taxonomies of coping; or if they appear, their links to autonomy are not explicit. Hence, the next sections focus on autonomy as a personal resource in coping and on the families of coping organized around it.

**Perceived autonomy.** Usually labeled autonomy orientations, these self-system beliefs refer to the extent to which one has access to one's genuine preferences and goals and the extent to which one expects the social context to respect, value, and defer to one's own agenda (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Connell, 1989). A person with an autonomous orientation can form and express robust goals and intentions that reflect his or her actual preferences. Moreover, an autonomous orientation includes the psychological freedom to act on these preferences and goals. In response to environmental or intrapsychic pressures, these expectations and capacities are a basis for open and flexible action, allowing the individual to "stay in touch with" the hierarchy of his or her genuine priorities, and not to lose sight of them while negotiating environmental or internal demands.

Individuals with low perceived autonomy have poor access to their actual preferences and generally expect that others will try to pressure and coerce them. Hence, environmental events tend to be appraised as coercive and social partners' intentions as hostile (Graham, Hudley, & Williams, 1992). In response to stress, such an orientation creates a great deal of pressure, which, when channeled externally, produces an "external" style of regulation in which the individual experiences the source of his or her action as originating in the external environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985a; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Pressure can also be "introjected," or channeled internally, in which the person takes on the coercive functions of the external demands and pressures the self to act accordingly (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; Ryan & Connell, 1989). Both of these styles of regulation are considered nonautonomous, in that they are reactive and not willfully deployed.

They can be contrasted with two more autonomous styles of responding. The first reflects regulations that were once externally imposed but have subsequently been willingly endorsed and autonomously internalized. It is labeled "integrated" to reflect the fact that these goals have been harmoniously combined with existing self structures. The second style is labeled "intrinsic." It describes a source of energy and direction for activities that are spontaneously enjoyable, like activities of learning, self-expression, and social interaction. Because these activities are inherently pleasurable, willingness to participate in them does not have to be recruited and then internalized. However, it should be
noted that their regulation will remain “intrinsic” only so long as other coercive elements, such as judgement and evaluation, are not superimposed upon them. To illustrate the flavor of these orientations, Table 14-1 includes items used to tap them during childhood and adulthood.

**Causality Orientation Scale (Deci & Ryan, 1985a)**

You have been offered a new position in a company and the first question that comes to your mind is, “I wonder if the new work will be interesting?” (+)

A close (same sex) friend of yours has been moody lately and a couple of times has become very angry with you for “nothing.” Your approach to handling this would be to share your observations with your friend and try to find out what is going on for him or her. (+)

**Self-Regulation Scale - Academic (Ryan & Connell, 1989)**

The reason I do my classwork is that I want to learn new things. (+)

The reason I try to answer hard questions in class is so I will know if I am right or wrong. (+)

**Parenting Sense of Autonomy (Skinner & Regan, 1992)**

When I’m with my kids, there’s nothing else I’d rather be doing. (+)

I wish I didn’t feel so trapped by parenting duties. (-)

I look forward to being with my children. (+)

I feel that parenting runs my entire life. (-)

**Perceived Academic Self-determination (Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais, Brière, Senécal, & Vallières, 1993)**

At school, I feel like I am in prison. (-)

I go to school out of personal choice. (+)

**Table 14.1. Sample Items Tapping Self-system Processes Connected with Autonomy.**

**Ways of Coping Organized around Autonomy**

Compared to the families of coping connected to relatedness and competence, very little has been written or studied about the families of coping associated with autonomy. We argue that, in general, the action tendencies triggered by
interactions that tax autonomy are organized around concession and defense. Concession and defense can be either autonomous or nonautonomous. Appraisals of environmental demands as threats to autonomy lead to reactive (nonautonomous) action tendencies, whereas appraisals of demands as challenges to autonomy trigger action tendencies that are self-determined.

Figure 14-4 depicts our current thinking about the autonomous and nonautonomous modes of concession and defense, along with some of the behaviors, emotions, and orientations that characterize them. For defense, we label the nonautonomous family of ways of coping “opposition;” for concession, it is labeled “perseveration.” The autonomous form of defense is labeled “negotiation” and the autonomous form of concession is “accommodation.” In the next four sections, we describe each way of coping in more detail and mention research that has touched on similar concepts.

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<tr>
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<th>CONCESSION</th>
<th>DEFENSE</th>
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<td><strong>Challenge to SELF</strong></td>
<td>Implement AUTHENTIC Action</td>
<td>Challenge to CONTEXT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTO</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Negotiation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOMOMOUS</td>
<td>Concession</td>
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<td><strong>Threat to SELF</strong></td>
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<td>NONA</td>
<td>Perseveration</td>
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<td>AUTONOMOUS</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Intrusive thoughts</td>
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Note. Within each column, the way of coping in bold is the most common label for that family of ways of coping.

**Figure 14.4.** Families of Coping Associated with Autonomy.
Opposition. "Oppositional" coping is considered a nonautonomous reaction to demands because its goal is taken from outside the self—that is, it is completely determined by the environmental demand, specifically, by the opposite of the demand. Within the coping area, this pattern of responding to stress has been given labels reflecting its anger, rigidity, and opposition, such as "externalizing," "venting," and "projection." Defiance, reactance, rebellion, explosion, projection, blaming others, venting, and revenge have in common that they are patterns of action recruited to oppose someone else's goals. Hence, we label this pattern of coping as "opposition." These behaviors have been observed, for example, as part of escalating cycles of parent-child coercion (Kochanska, 1995, 1997; Patterson & Bank, 1989) and have been studied as psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966).

Oppositional reactions usually have serious social consequences. Oppositional behavior tends to provoke escalated demands, even from initially benign social partners (Dodge, 1991; Graham, 1998; Parpal & Maccoby, 1985). A less obvious consequence is that, in his or her push toward defiance, the person forgoes the opportunity to form or defend an autonomous goal (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). This interferes with any attempts to create a scenario in which that goal can be realized. The individual also learns little about the actual goals of social partners or how to coordinate them with his or her own goals.

Perseveration. The nonautonomous form of concession is "perseverance" or rigid compliance. Perseveration, and its variations, including compliance, conformity, or submission, are based on an introjected style of regulation in which the individual, in response to environmental demands, is subjected to strong internal pressures to submit. This pattern of engagement can be distinguished from willing cooperation and problem-solving because of its rigid and urgent quality and because it lacks flexibility and responsiveness to external and internal feedback. The pressured and anxious quality of engagement, in addition to dampening enjoyment and draining energetic resources, also blocks access to cognitive and social resources, and interferes with hypothesis-testing and strategizing, thereby short-circuiting learning.

Most important for autonomy, perseverance is coercive and does not allow the individual the psychological freedom to alter, refocus, or relinquish goals. Several researchers have suggested that this pattern of action constitutes a risk factor for depression and hopelessness (Brandstätter, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). Perseveration may reflect the inability to disengage from goals that are no longer feasible or that interfere with other more important goals. Prolonged pursuit of unattainable goals, such as remaining young, creates the experience of helplessness. Prolonged pursuit of the wrong goals, such as image or money, means that healthier goals are less likely to be attained (Kasser & Ryan, 1993). Moreover, if social partners come to see that these goals are not feasible or genuinely important, perseverance may also erode social support.
Negotiation. The more positive patterns of responding connected to autonomy have been studied less or have been incorporated into an amalgam of “positive” or “approach” coping that includes problem-solving. We believe it is important to differentiate and specifically study forms of autonomous defense and concession. The autonomous form of defense is “negotiation.” Defense of high priority goals, because it is autonomous, differs from opposition in that negotiation is flexible, open, creative, and responsive to new information. The primary orientation is not toward foiling an opponent but toward creating a scenario in which all genuine high priority goals can be met. Processes of social negotiation do not result in “winning,” they allow the individual to achieve high priority goals and to concede to high priority goals of others.

Similarly, processes of “internal negotiation” do not result in “self-sacrifice,” they allow individuals to articulate, prioritize, and coordinate their own multiple important goals. Negotiations during stressful encounters are, in turn, key experiences in which to learn about the values of the self and others, as well as to experience others as flexible negotiators. In such interactions, individuals discover and create hierarchies of goals and are able to integrate their goals meaningfully with those of others (individuals, organizations, or societies).

Accommodation. Accommodation has been described as a major mode of coping in work focusing on the challenges of successful aging (Brandstätter & Renner, 1990; Brandstätter, Wentura, & Greve, 1993; Brandstätter, Wentura, & Rothermund, 1999). Accommodation reflects a pattern of “willing submission” or “committed compliance” (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995) and results from integrated regulation (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Accommodation implies a quality of concession that is above and beyond grudging acceptance or foot-dragging compliance. It emphasizes flexibility, openness, cooperation, and “good will.” It is autonomous in that it reflects genuine acceptance, authentic endorsement, and personal conviction.

As studied under the misleading label “secondary control” (J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995), accommodation has been shown to be a critical part of adaptation to uncontrollable or unavoidable events. Stated colloquially, accommodative processes allow people to act according to the maxim: “If you can’t get out of it, get into it.” These are processes that allow people to move beyond self-pity, bitterness, and recrimination to an orientation of acceptance of current constraints, whatever their source. In general, they allow a person to stop focusing on the past and assigning blame and to begin focusing on the future and accepting responsibility (Brickman et al, 1982). Accommodation allows creation of fresh perspectives, such as by focusing on the positive or carrying out downward social comparisons. This frees resources for action and allows the emergence of new goals, which are not only genuine but are also constructive and attainable. The emergence of revised goal hierarchies is a hallmark of adjustment after loss. It is a turning point in the decision to let the past stay in the past and to move on.
Autonomy Support as a Characteristic of the Social Context

An important function of autonomy support in the social context, and not just during times of stress, is to contribute to the development of an autonomous orientation in the people who function there (Ryan & Solky, 1996). Whether referring to a society, an organization, an institution, a family, or a dyadic partnership, social contexts that provide people opportunities to realize their genuine goals and preferences will promote in people the accumulation of personal resources described as perceived autonomy.

Important determinants of how supportive social partners and contexts will be are the actions of individuals themselves, some of which are captured in the ways of coping just described. For example, when individuals clearly express their preferences and negotiate for solutions, social partners are more likely to defer to their wishes. When individuals willingly cooperate, it is easier for partners to willingly cooperate as well. When people actively and enthusiastically problem solve about how to meet the goals of all parties involved, social partners are more likely to suggest compromises and to concede low priority goals.

Unfortunately, less adaptive ways of coping are likely to provoke less supportive reactions from social partners. For example, when people simply conform, it is difficult for partners to discern that they are experiencing pressure. When, in reaction to resistance, individuals submit very quickly, social contexts are likely to overestimate their agreement, thus forfeiting the individuals’ opportunities to negotiate. On the other hand, when individuals react to demands with defiance, social contexts are likely to become more coercive (Patterson & Bank, 1989) or to simply withdraw their support (Tennen & Affleck, 1990). These patterns of person-context interaction suggest cycles that maintain or amplify individual’s ways of coping and context support (or lack of support) over time.

Research on Autonomy and Coping

In our own work on children’s coping in the academic domain, we have begun to explore the connections among perceived autonomy, autonomy support, and children’s coping. The work began with the assessment of the four families of coping associated with autonomy as responses to failures and setbacks in school (Skinner & Wellborn, 1994, 1997). The assessment of opposition and accommodation and their characteristic behaviors, emotions, and orientations were relatively straightforward. However, because of the power relations in the classroom, ways of coping that belong to the family of “negotiation” were more difficult to assess; and in general are rarely seen or reported in the classroom context, even in open-ended interviews with children (Skinner, Altman, & Sherwood, 1991).

In the first set of studies, we concentrated on two ways of coping: accommodation and opposition. A few previous studies had shown a correlation
between children's perceived autonomy (assessed with the Relative Autonomy Index or RAI; Ryan & Connell, 1989) and two related ways of coping, positive coping (problem-solving and self-comforting) and projection (blaming others) (Wellborn, Mellof-Crummey, Connell, & Skinner, 1989). Unique effects of perceived autonomy were found on these two ways of coping, over and above the significant effects of perceived competence and relatedness.

In our longitudinal study of about 1600 elementary school children in grades three through seven (see Skinner et al., 1998, for details), we also found that children's perceived autonomy (as indexed by scores on the RAI) was a significant predictor of both accommodation and oppositional coping, even after controlling for the significant effects of relatedness and competence. Most importantly, we tested a model of context, self, and action. In this model, children's experiences of parental autonomy support versus coercion were examined as predictors of children's perceived autonomy which in turn predicted their accommodation and opposition coping. This model was found it to be a good fit with self-report data (Skinner & Edge, in press).

Moreover, we examined children's perceived autonomy as a predictor of changes in children's coping over the school year. As expected, children's perceived autonomy in the fall predicted changes in their coping from fall to spring of the school year, in spite of relatively high interindividual stability in children's ways of coping over time (Skinner & Edge, in press; Skinner & Snyder, 1999). Parent reports of parenting also predicted children's ways of coping; an especially strong connection was found between coercive parenting and children's oppositional coping in school (Skinner & Snyder, 1999).

Reciprocal feedback effects were also examined, in which children's coping was used to predict changes in parenting over the school year. As expected, children's ways of coping in the fall were significant predictors of changes in their experiences of parent action from fall to spring. Children who showed more accommodative coping in the fall experienced their parents as becoming more autonomy supportive from fall to spring of the school year, whereas children who coped through opposition reported that their parents became more coercive over the same time period (Skinner & Edge, in press).

Recent analyses are examining the relations between different styles of self-regulation (external, introjected, identified, and intrinsic) and different ways of coping in school. Analyses focused on the four ways of emotion regulation as markers of the four families of coping, with accepting responsibility as a marker of accommodation, blamelessness as a marker of negotiation, self-blame as a marker of perseveration, and projection as a marker of opposition (see Skinner & Wellborn, 1994, 1997, for a more detailed discussion of regulation of emotion and ways of coping). We found that, as predicted, accommodation and negotiation coping were both correlated positively with the two more autonomous forms of regulation, namely, identified and intrinsic regulation. The nonautonomous ways of coping were, as predicted, correlated with the nonautonomous regula-
Perseveration was strongly related to an introjected style of regulation and opposition was correlated with external regulation.

A final set of analyses examined the effects of perceived autonomy on each way of coping, over and above the effects of perceived competence and relatedness. For each way of coping, perceived competence and relatedness were entered as a block, and then the designated style of self-regulation was entered. Of interest was whether perceived autonomy significantly increased the prediction of its way of coping. For all four ways of coping, perceived autonomy did make a significant unique contribution to its way of coping over and above the (significant) effects of the other self-system processes. The results of these analyses provide initial empirical support for the connections among perceived autonomy, autonomy support, and coping suggested by the motivational model. The data were consistent with the notion that parental autonomy support contributes to children's academic autonomy orientations, which in turn shapes how they cope with challenges and problems in school; as well as the possibility that the ways in which children cope have a reciprocal effect on how their parents deal with them.

The Functions of Autonomy During Actual Stressful Episodes

What does the model's definition of coping, namely, action regulation under stress, imply about the functions of autonomy and autonomy support during interactions when people are distressed? The model suggests that autonomy, like the other self-system processes, can supply key motivational resources in times of stress, acting as a source of energy and direction for behavior, emotion, and orientation. When people have access to motivational resources, the regulation of their action is more adaptive, by which we mean more organized and coherent, more flexible and open to internal and external information, and more constructive and prosocial. This quality of regulation allows a course of action to be implemented which is effective in service of one's own genuine high priority goals and the high priority goals of important social partners, even when demands tax or exceed an individual's resources. (For reviews of the concept of regulation in coping, see Barrett & Campos, 1991; Block & Block, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Eisenberg, Fabes, & Guthrie, 1997; Rosman, 1992; Skinner, 1999).

In specific situations, adaptive self-system processes improve coping by reducing objective demands, by leading people to appraise stressful interactions as challenges, by triggering adaptive action tendencies, and by boosting the quality of their regulation. When maladaptive self-system processes are applied to a stressful interaction, they can undermine coping by increasing objective
demands, by escalating the experience of threat, by triggering maladaptive action tendencies, or by interfering with regulatory efforts. In the following sections, we consider autonomy and autonomy support as potential motivational resources for coping.

**Autonomy as an Asset or Liability during Actual Coping Episodes**

During stressful interactions, the self-system processes connected to auton-
omy can serve as a source of energy and as a personal “compass.” Perceived autonomy functions as a set of guides for potential action and as a source of energy for regulation. In general, a sense of autonomy allows individuals to maintain access to their genuine goals and preferences (basically convictions about the limits of what they will and will not do) as well as to maintain the expectation that interaction partners (including people, events, and institutions) respect those goals. Taken together, these contribute to the experience of having genuine choices. This capacity can be stabilizing during stressful transactions.

*Appraisals and experiences of stress.* At a first line of defense, a sense of autonomy shapes the experience of stress. When events or people actually are objectively coercive (that is, when they really are attempting to pressure an individual’s actions), people with a sense of autonomy experience these events as less coercive. That is, they appraise them more as a challenge than as a threat to autonomy. This does not imply that they are unaware that events or social partners are exerting force. However, an autonomous orientation creates a kind of buffer around those events, within which the individual maintains the psychological space to willfully decide how to respond to external pressure. For example, he or she assumes that the forces are not acting malevolently but instead are acting out of their own high priority goals. The individual further assumes that, when social partners realize they are trespassing on the individual’s rights, they will be willing to readjust their demands. In general, people who are high on autonomy tend to view coercive events, not as demands, but as “requests.” Even when coerced, they are able to maintain the sense that there is a piece of themselves that is indomitable.

The buffering effects of an autonomous orientation can be contrasted with the amplifying effects of a nonautonomous head set. This general orientation, in which people have difficulty maintaining access to their own genuine goals and at the same time expect the social context to be intentionally coercive, makes stress more stressful. Even minor requests are experienced as demands and can create enormous intrapsychic pressure. All demands are escalated to imperatives and, as a result, the hierarchy of genuine preferences held by the self and by the external environment is disguised. With no psychological space to actively decide how to respond, the person can experience demands as overwhelming.
Action tendencies. Appraisals of events as challenges or threats to autonomy trigger corresponding action tendencies. The experience of demands as a challenge can lead to accommodation or to negotiation, depending on the extent to which the demands impinge on high priority goals, and it would not be unusual to move flexibly between these two action tendencies. In stressful situations, their effects are synergistically positive. Concession of low priority goals allows more resources to be devoted to the defense of high priority goals; more achievement of high priority goals allows more good will to be channeled into concession. Defense of high priority goals is unambivalent, and the self is less likely to feel threatened that it will be overrun by demands.

A sense of autonomy can be helpful even when people are (or anticipate being) forced into acting against their will. Processes of autonomy can keep these experiences of involuntary submission from becoming overwhelming by accepting constraints and re-exerting the will. The act of deciding to submit to painful medical procedures, or of deciding that a disability will not curb certain desired activities, or of deciding that a crime will not continue to exert coercive effects (e.g., by keeping one at home), are exertions of autonomy.

In contrast, the appraisal of events as threats to autonomy tends to trigger the action tendency of opposition. When this response is socially or personally unacceptable, it may be overridden by rigid compliance, in which intrapsychic pressures force the self to submit. Neither opposition nor perseveration are autonomous or volitional and they have synergistic negative effects. The pressure created by submission escalates the experience of coercion, which makes it more likely that an explosion will occur. The rigidity and non-responsiveness of these two forms of coping seal the individual off from communication with the external (or internal) world, for example, from signals that certain demands reflect high priorities and that others can be downgraded in importance. These forms of coping rob action of its flexibility, making it less likely that the true goals of the individual will be accomplished.

Energetic resources for regulation. By definition, coping regulations take place during interactions that tax or exceed a person's resources. Volitional models of self-regulation (e.g., H. Heckhausen, 1991; H. Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985; Kuhl, 1986) point out that one effect of stress can be to block an individual's access to his or her own personal capacities (cognitive, motivational, volitional) for adaptive action. Access can be blocked by anything that uses up energetic resources, such as intense emotions, cognitive ruminations, competing action tendencies, or attentional distracters.

Perceived autonomy can aid in regulation by helping a person reestablish or maintain access to his or her own personal resources. It does so because coping that is self-determined requires fewer regulatory resources compared to nonautonomous forms of coping. This is true for two reasons. First, autonomous action tendencies originate from the true self and bring their own psychic energy.
During autonomous (intrinsic or integrated) regulation, in which the true self is experienced as the source of action, action tendencies (behaviors, emotions, and orientations) work in a synergistic fashion, and executive or ego energy is available for engagement without being used for self-awareness or conscious control (Kuhl, 1984).

Second, autonomous forms of coping, like accommodation and negotiation, are recognized by both the self and the social context as more adaptive. Hence, they are less likely to need to be intentionally regulated, that is, deflected or halted. For the most part, during stressful transactions, these action tendencies need only to be boosted, supported, or focused. Such boosting requires relatively few regulatory resources. However, even when these action tendencies do need to be regulated, it is relatively easy to do so, because they are flexible and open to new information.

In contrast, the action tendencies triggered by appraisals of stressful transactions as threats to autonomy require more regulatory resources. First, the expression of the action tendencies themselves involves intense affect. Specifically, perseveration includes intense anxiety, and opposition is characterized by intense anger. These emotions and their accompanying ruminations use up energetic resources, and block access to other cognitive and motivational processes. The force and focus of these nonautonomous action tendencies also interfere with the consideration of alternative, potentially more adaptive, action tendencies.

Second, action tendencies like perseveration and opposition, are likely to be viewed by the self and social partners as undesirable. Hence, they often become targets of regulation, that is, of active attempts to intentionally tone them down, or to contain and disguise them. These regulatory efforts are difficult because both perseveration and opposition are rigid and not particularly open to information from internal or external sources. As a result, the nonautonomous forms of coping require a great deal of energetic resources. It is common for a person to have to concentrate all his or her effort on derailing these action tendencies before the person even has the option of accessing their cognitive resources or consulting with themselves or others about alternative courses of action. The phrase “I was beside myself” is an apt description of the experience when a nonautonomous action tendency is in charge of coping.

**Autonomy Support versus Coercion in Stressful Interactions**

From the motivational model, shown in Figure 14-5, comes the idea that social contexts can promote (versus undermine) coping by the extent to which they bring warmth, structure, and autonomy support (versus hostility, chaos, and coercion) to stressful interactions. A common example of autonomy support during a stressful interaction is when a parent validates a child’s feelings. Simply by accurately acknowledging a child’s experience, for example, during a painful
medical procedure or during a child's adjustment to a new context, a parent may reduce the child's distress enough that the child has access to energeitic resources sufficient to successfully regulate his or her own action tendencies (e.g., emotional upset or the desire to leave or resist).

![Diagram of self-determination theory]

**Figure 14.5. A Process Model of Coping.**

When social partners add motivational resources to an interaction, they improve coping through precisely the same means as does the person, that is, by reducing demands, by promoting appraisals of challenge, and by helping the person maintain or gain access to personal resources for regulation. Social partners can reduce coercion by creating or negotiating some breathing room around a stressful event for more active decision-making. Social partners can promote appraisals that acknowledge the target person's true feelings and experiences and that are not judgmental or prescriptive about reactions to stress. They can remind or reflect on the person's own goal hierarchy and help distinguish high from low priority goals.

During coping, social partners who wish to support autonomy can actively encourage selective and choiceful concession and negotiation. Concession can be facilitated by pointing out the reasons for going along and by highlighting the connection between current cooperation and long-term goals. Social partners
can support "negotiation" even with seemingly fixed events, such as disability or disease, essentially helping people distinguish the actions that must be conceded from the goals which can still be met. Especially useful may be helping people untangle higher-order goals from their lower-order instantiation. For example, even if walking is no longer possible, people may still be able to be mobile, independent, and social. Or, even if biological children are not an option, people can still have a role in nurturing the young.

Unfortunately, social contexts can also bring coercion to stressful transactions, thereby interfering with adaptive coping. People can insist that there is only one correct course of action or can demand certain reactions to events. Social partners can add coercion by falling apart themselves and demanding care from the target individual. Social contexts can influence appraisals, for example, by emphasizing the coercive features of the experience or by focusing on the negative consequences of noncompliance. They can help trigger maladaptive action tendencies. For example, when social partners become demanding, the person may begin to feel coerced and become angry and oppositional. These competing action tendencies interfere with regulation.

**Autonomy as a Quality of Regulatory Capacity and of Relationships**

People's self-system processes and social relationships shape their coping, both in specific situations and cumulatively over time. At the same time, however, coping feeds back into these processes. A primary function of constructive coping episodes is to provide opportunities for the development of adaptive self-system processes and social relationships. These function as short-term personal and social resources for coping. These resources, because they propel and sustain constructive engagement with the social and physical environment, contribute to the development of people's long-term coping capacity and to the qualities of their relationships.

*Development of autonomy.* In terms of autonomy, an important function of dealing constructively with adversity is allowing people to discover and elaborate their "true selves" and to learn how to articulate, coordinate, and defend the life values that are genuinely important to them. More specifically, stressful situations, in which all desired goals are not available, are opportunities to learn about the self and about priorities. Losses can lead to the realization of what is really important. Adversity may inspire people to create and maintain a course of action that is more congruent with their genuine desires and preferences. They may become less interested in societal or other external definitions of success and more resolved to build a life congruent with their own values and priorities.

Challenges provide opportunities for the development of capacities needed to exercise autonomy. These can be recognized in childhood as the development of autonomous regulation (Ryan, 1993) or conscience (Kochanska, 1993). These
capacities suggest that prosocial goals and habits of effectiveness have been harmoniously integrated into the value hierarchy of the self. These capacities not only facilitate social relationships and achievements; they are also the basis from which children learn to “deploy themselves” in service of their own goals (Kuhl & Fuhrmann, 1998). These capacities continue to develop throughout the lifespan (Brandstätter et al., 1999). They include the construction of rich and flexible goal hierarchies, the ability to make choices that are in one’s own genuine self-interest, and to be steadfast in following paths that allow one to realize one’s own goals.

**Autonomous relationships.** Processes of concession and negotiation during constructive coping also contribute to the development of mutually autonomous relationships (Butzel & Ryan, 1997). Identification of high-priority goals is a process of discovery, not only about the self, but about the social context as well. Within constructive social interactions, these processes allow people to identify goals that are commonly shared as well as goals that diverge. Mutual respect for divergent goals creates an atmosphere in which problem-solving can ensue to coordinate or sequence multiple goals. Autonomous concession of less important goals creates good will in social partners which can then motivate complementary concessions from the other person. Creation of genuine goal hierarchies for dyads, families, groups, or institutions provides a solid base for autonomous joint decision-making during stress.

These relationship qualities also allow dyads and social groups to be differentially constructive and flexible in stressful situations. Adaptive dyads (or social groups) are ones that can work together to articulate what each member really wants in an interaction and can generate several effective strategies that allow high-priority goals to be met. When dyads or groups are characterized by a history of rigid rule following or one-sided authority, adaptive action in the face of stress is blocked. Relationship qualities reflect a history of experiences that shape the self-systems of all participants, and so contribute to appraisals of each others’ intentions (for example, as genuine vs. manipulative) and trigger adaptive or maladaptive joint action tendencies (such as cooperation vs. power struggles). These appraisals and action tendencies can facilitate or constrain adaptive coping when people are distressed.

**Conclusions**

The goal of this chapter was to make a case for the centrality of self-determination to coping. We argue that constructs, principles, and assessments of autonomy can contribute to the conceptualization and empirical study of many facets of the coping process. Autonomy-related concepts can be used to explain why certain classes of events are stressful, to identify ways of coping that have
been largely ignored up to now, to describe a set of personal and social resources that support coping, to suggest mechanisms by which the self and social partners can promote or hinder coping in moment-to-moment stressful transactions, and to characterize the kinds of regulatory capacities and social relationships that both shape and are shaped by coping episodes.

Adding autonomy to research on coping processes should complement, without detracting from, the personal and social resources emphasized in work on perceived control, social support, and attachment. Beyond their additive effects, however, theories of self-determination can help create a platform from which to reconsider issues faced by the field of coping as a whole. In closing, we mention three, namely, intentionality in coping, secondary control, and the adaptiveness of approach versus avoidance coping.

*Intentionality in coping.* Theories of self-determination, because they focus on the will, bring the questions and terminology of volition to conceptualizations of coping (Skinner, 1999). Some theorists have suggested that only stress reactions with certain qualities of volition qualify as coping. For example, Compas et al. (1997) have argued that only effortful and voluntary reactions to stress should be considered coping and they have classified certain ways of coping according to such criteria.

Theories of self-determination and volition make clear that no action (and by implication, no way of coping) can be classified *a priori* as effortful or voluntary. Most actions (except reflexes) are available to many different levels of volition, for example, automatic action tendencies, effortful action regulation, intentional action regulation, and autonomous regulation. Such dimensions may be useful for distinguishing within a family of action tendencies or coping categories. However, voluntary versus involuntary is not a good dimension for distinguishing between ways of coping and so is not useful as a higher-order dimension upon which to build taxonomies of coping.

*Secondary control.* A whole set of processes by which people come to terms with losses have entered the fields of control and coping under the label of "secondary control." Originally described by Rothbaum, Weisz, and Snyder (1982) and recently elaborated by J. Heckhausen and Schulz (1995), these processes are contrasted with primary control, which refers to active attempts to change the state of the world in line with one's wishes. Secondary control, which refers to attempts to bring oneself in line with the state of the world, consists mostly of psychological processes that promote constructive disengagement from goals that are no longer attainable. When looked at from the perspective of control, these are considered "secondary," and recent discussions have emphasized the evolutionary and adaptive primacy of primary control (J. Heckhausen & Schulz, 1994). Indeed, experiences of primary control are necessary for the development of a sense of competence and control and for the capacity to implement effective action.

Nevertheless, we argue that, although processes described as secondary control are useful in dealing with loss of control, that is not their most important
function. When the criteria of effective action is broadened to focus instead on adaptive action, then it becomes clear that "secondary control" processes are actually primary in the service of autonomy. They refer to processes by which goals, intentions, and plans are constructed and revised. Lack of controllability is one condition which requires reconsideration of goal pursuit, but it is only one condition. People can disengage from goals that are objectively attainable because they are too costly, because they interfere with one’s own higher-priority goals, or because they compromise the interests of other people or groups.

These processes are better referred to using terms such as “flexible goal pursuit,” “accommodation” (Brandstätter & Renner, 1990), or autonomous regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b). The term “secondary control” is misleading: it represents a myopic focus on control and obscures the connection between these processes and autonomy. It is noteworthy that recently developed measures of “assimilation” (primary control) and accommodation find them to be independent constructs, and further find that the negative pole of assimilation is helplessness, whereas the negative pole of accommodation is “rigid perseveration” (Brandstätter & Renner, 1990). It is also interesting that studies examining the effects of secondary control have used measures of accommodation to tap these processes (J. Heckhausen, 1997).

Approach versus avoidance coping. Discussions of overarching dimensions of coping have long included debates about whether, in times of stress, it is better to approach or avoid stressful transactions (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Although most discussions conclude that both strategies are important, at least in theory, the majority of studies find that approach coping is more adaptive, in the sense of showing stronger associations with positive antecedents and outcomes. A main reason for this finding is that approach coping usually consists of problem-solving and strategizing whereas avoidance coping usually refers to escape.

Work on autonomy emphasizes that both engagement and disengagement, just like concession and defense, can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on the qualities with which they are implemented. Perseveration as a form of rigid engagement is a kind of approach coping, but it is not adaptive. Autonomously deciding to relinquish certain goals is a form of avoidance coping that is also adaptive, in that it frees up resources for higher priority or attainable goals. This analysis implies that it is not approach or avoidance per se that makes the coping more or less adaptive. Instead it is the extent to which the patterns of action are flexible, organized, and constructive.

In sum, many researchers working in the area of coping have pointed out the need for conceptualizations and studies of coping that reflect the depth and complexity of adaptive processes (Compaś, 1998; Lazarus, 1993). Theories of perceived control, attachment, and social support have brought important insights and assessments to research on coping. The central thesis of this chapter is that the large body of theory and research on self-determination can further enrich work on coping. As integrated and organized by the motivational model, these theories view the self and its social relationships as key assets or liabilities during
coping, shaping appraisals, action tendencies, and patterns of regulation during stressful transactions with the social and physical environments.

The model points out, however, that coping is not just the beneficiary of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. At the same time, coping is also a catalyst critical to their development. Patterns of coping, like negotiation and opposition, elicit reactions from the context that set in motion cycles of person-context interactions, which shape the self-system beliefs and social relationships which gave rise to them. Cumulatively, and over time, these processes of interaction contribute to cycles of coping and context reactions that promote (or undermine) the development of regulatory capacities and relationship qualities. We hope that some of the arguments presented in this chapter may encourage researchers to pursue the study of the dynamics among self-determination, coping, and development.

References


