

### **Special Issue – Australian Educational and Developmental Psychologist – Coping and the world of young people**

Since the turn of the 21st Century key figures in the field of psychology such as Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000) called on us to explore human capacity rather than focusing on failings or inadequacies. In 2000 the *American Psychologist* devoted much of the sixth issue of Volume 55 to papers that made the argument from many perspectives. Additionally in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) has alerted us to the benefits of considering psychology from a positive perspective rather than one of pathology and incapacity. Consistent with that approach is the ever-growing interest in the area of health promotion and prevention. This Special Issue on coping in the world of young people and adolescents is consistent with the focus on health and wellness in addressing research in the field of coping theory and interventions.

Today information about almost everything is readily available. It is only a Google search away. Information is only the first step. When it comes to coping, one of the most highly published areas in psychology, there is a minefield of information. I recently performed a Google search on coping and got 17 frames, but the more I hit on frames 1-16 the more came up. If I had the patience and the time I might have been able to keep going for dozens and dozens of frames. All results were teaching about coping, such as how to cope with a disaster, a transition, a death, a loss of a pet, exams, talking in front of a crowd or performing music to name a few. All full of good sense, some of it common sense and some of it just good reminders. So why develop programs, why do research for 15 years on the topic and keep doing it? There is still a great deal for us to learn about young people and their worlds, particularly in the Australian context. And when it comes to measurement and interventions we want to rely on sound, Australian empirical data on what works and what does not work.

In the international No 1 best seller *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell explains the 'tipping point', that magic moment when ideas, trends and social behaviours cross the threshold, tip, and spread like wildfire. Taking a look behind the surface of many familiar occurrences in our everyday world, Gladwell explains the fascinating social dynamics that cause rapid change. He espouses principles such as the contagion effect. We can have the contagion of depression and despair or alternatively the contagion of optimism, resilience, wellbeing or happiness and why not coping? Gladwell also points out small beginnings

can have big effects and that change happens not gradually but at *one dramatic moment*. He provides substantial evidence to support his case and whilst it is difficult, if not impossible, to predict the tipping point for recovery from the despair and depression that hits many young people, causes them to abuse substances and take risks that harm them, it is good to aim for it.

The six papers in this Special Issue come from a research team who utilise the conceptual framework of coping as identified by the Adolescent Coping Scale. Thus, there is a coherence and synergy in the language of coping represented by each of the papers.

The first paper, *Attitudes to School, Coping, Wellbeing and Stress: An Examination of VCAL Students*, utilises the Adolescent Coping Scale to report how a group of young people participating in a recently developed Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) for Year 11 and 12 students cope with their studies. The second paper in this group, *The Effect of Type of School Bullying on Threat Appraisal and Coping Style of Adolescent Victims* reports on the ways in which a group of young people in a regional, all male secondary school setting, cope with bullying and contrasts their adaptation with students in a co-educational secondary school setting in metropolitan Melbourne.

The second group of papers address issues related to prevention. Firstly, a program known as Seasons for Growth, designed to deal with grief and loss, in the paper *The experience of loss: Coping and the Seasons for Growth Program* is evaluated using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach. The second paper in this section, *Coping Skills Training to Adolescent Girls in a Small Group Counselling Context*, continues to utilise a dual qualitative and quantitative approach to evaluate a small group counselling intervention using the Best of Coping, coping skills program. The third paper, *Teaching Young People to Cope: Benefits and Gains for At Risk Students* reviews three studies with young people who are at risk of depression, those with specific learning difficulties and those young people who are academically low achieving in a secondary school setting. The final paper, *The Best of Coping: Comparing Format and the Mode of Delivery* considers issues that relate to program intervention, in particular it compares a pencil and paper format with self-paced interactive CD-Rom format.

Each of the papers have been written to stand alone and to provide research-based information to aid practice and as a stimulus for further research. Therefore, since they all represent work in the area of coping, utilising a common conceptual framework, there are some unavoidable overlaps in that each paper describes the instrument or the program being used in sufficient detail for it to be meaningful in light of the paper being presented.

Collectively the papers encourage the reader to make use of the information in professional practice and push the boundaries of our current understandings of stress and coping forward in order to advance our research and practices further in the field of educational and developmental psychology.

I thank the key researchers for their scholarship and contributions, the College of Educational and Developmental Psychology for the opportunity to present this Special Issue. In particular, I wish to thank Tim Hanan, who like me, thought that this issue on coping was a good idea and worth pursuing and Dr Terry Bowles who has undertaken the review and editorial process so willingly and ably.

Finally, I appreciate the editorial assistance and reviews that Clare Ivens, Martina Dopheide and Dr Charles Poole have provided for this Special Issue.

## References

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Erica Frydenberg  
Guest Editor