



## ROADS TO POSITIVE SELF-DEVELOPMENT: STYLES OF COPING THAT PREDICT WELL-BEING

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### ABSTRACT

Scientific literature has been registering an increasing interest in the field of well-being. Though the conceptual consensus is that coping is one of the factors responsible for well-being preservation through life span, few empirical researches address this issue using appropriate well-being measures. Thus, this work aimed essentially to explore the relations between well-being and coping, examining more specifically the influence of styles of coping in psychological well-being. In order to do so, we worked with a sample of 293 individuals with ages ranging from 18 to 84 years old, which completed three instruments: a Socio-Demographic Questionnaire (Maia de

Carvalho & Vale Dias, 2010), the Portuguese version of Brief Cope (Carver, 1997) by Pais-Ribeiro and Rodrigues (2004) and the Portuguese version of the Psychological Well-Being Scales from Carol Ryff (1989b) by Ferreira and Simões (1999). It was found that particular styles of coping predict specific dimensions of psychological well-being and that socio-demographic factors explain a small proportion of the variance in well-being. The discussion addressed the results implications regarding the understanding of well-being development.

**Key Words:** Psychological Well-Being; Coping; Positive Psychology; Development.

### INTRODUCTION

While the end of the 20th century became known by the publication of important studies on psychological stress and coping (*e.g.* Lazarus & Folkman, 1985; Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), at the turn of the 21st century the study of coping has assumed an important role



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in the understanding of well-being.

Within the framework of studies on stress, coping was one of the fundamental variables to be found because it represents the way subjects can, by themselves, manage the impact of stressful situations. Coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts or strategies that people adopt to maintain reduce or tolerate internal or external demands of stress inducing situations or situations that threaten their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1985; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In fact, the relevance of coping derives from the premise that individuals are not passive receivers of the forces of the environment but active agents in the construction of meaning and responses to adjustment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus, 2006; Lazarus & DeLongis, 1983; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

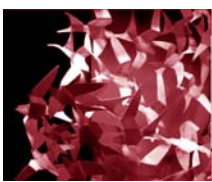
In this way, coping appears as one of the most important variables to understand positive development with regard to adjustment, developmental tasks management and personal growth.

Assuming that coping styles can have a preponderant role on the well-being of the subjects, some authors have come to explore their effects on mental and physical health (cf. Park & Adler, 2003). However, there are few studies on coping that do not take as a result the presence or absence of psychopathology rather than well-being (cf. Karademas, 2007).

In the field of Psychology, with the emergence of Positive Psychology, specific models of well-being were empirically developed (cf. Santos, Ferreira, Silva & Almeida, 2010). An example of a developmental perspective of well-being was offered by Carol Ryff's model of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989b). Ryff's model is based on an interpretation of the Greek concept of *eudaimonia* that suggests that *daimon* is best understood as an ideal towards individuals struggle to achieve, being *eudaimonia* considered the demonstration of the process of personal potential realization (Ryff, 1989b). As Novo (2003) shows, Ryff has supported the proposal of Waterman (1993) that *eudaimonia* is part of the expression of personality development, beyond happiness or hedonistic pleasure. Seeking for a structure of positive psychological process the researcher started the analysis of some theoretical perspectives of clinical psychology, developmental psychology and personality psychology to explore the qualities that several authors had associated to positive mental health (cf. Ryff, 1989a, b; Ryff & Heidrich, 1997; Ryff et al., 1999). To assess the existence of alternative developmental and health criteria possibly unknown by scientific models, Ryff also collected qualitative data revealing conceptions that individuals have about (Ryff, 1989a). The combined use of these two strategies, one deductive and the other inductive, has resulted in six dimensions, whose names were assigned to the six scales of psychological well-being considered by Ryff: Autonomy, Self-Acceptance, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, Positive Relations, and Personal Growth.

Because well-being is best designed as an extensive construction within life cycle, which involves representing of social roles, Ryff and her colleagues also focused on the influence of socio-demographic variables. However, like the findings in studies carried out with the subjective well-being model (Diener & Suh, 1997; Diener & Ryan, 2009), socio-demographic factors alone explain only a small proportion of the variance of psychological well-being (between 3% to 24%) (Ryff, 1989b). Other factors, such as personality (Ryff & Schmutte, 1997), life experiences, social comparisons, reflected appraisals, (cf. Ryff & Heidrich, 1997) and coping (Tsenkova et. al., 2008), seem to have a greater impact on the different dimensions of psychological well-being.

Thus, literature on well-being has been emphasizing the importance of studying the processes involved in active adaptation to stress and the mechanisms that attenuate the confrontation with adversity, leading to growth (Ryff & Heidrich, 2007). Taking the multidimensional construct components of psychological well-being as relatively stable (Ryff, 1989b) and, in a way, associated with personal provisions (Ryff & Schmutte, 1997), they may reflect the use of certain styles of coping. However, few studies on coping have evaluated its effect on positive well-being using measures which don't accentuate the pathological domain.



## METHOD

### Goals

The main goal of this study is to make a contribution to the understanding of the factors that promote the development of well-being. Starting from a model that defines well-being as a process of personal development and that, therefore, gives individuals an active role in the resolution of their problems, it is important to evaluate the influence of coping styles in psychological well-being.

According to prior studies we hypothesized: H1- psychological well-being dimensions and socio-demographic variables are correlated; H2- psychological well-being dimensions and the different styles of coping are correlated; H3- socio-demographic variables explain a reduced proportion of the variance of psychological well-being; H4- coping styles influence the relationship between socio-demographic variables and the psychological well-being; H5- certain styles of coping predict higher levels of psychological well-being.

### Sample

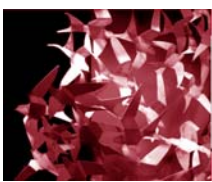
The sample has 293 participants, 198 (67.6%) female and 95 (32.4%) male (Table 1). The average age of the participants is 32.75 years (SD = 13.29). The younger individual is 18 years old and the oldest individual is 84 years old. Most of the subjects are single (59%) or married (31.4%), cohabit with parents and siblings (12.3%) or with the partner (26.3%). The average socio-economic level is the one that appears more frequently (67.9%) in the sample (Table 1). In terms of education level, two major groups were highlighted: the subjects that just completed high school (46.8%) and individuals who have a Bachelor's degree (41.3%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of subjects by socio-demographic variables (frequencies and percentages)

	N	%
Sex		
Male	95	32.4
Female	198	67.6
Total	293	100
Age		
18-30	162	55.3
31-60	118	40.3
≥60	8	2.7
Missing	5	1.7
Total	293	100
Socio-Economic Level		
Low	23	7.8
Average	199	67.9
High	59	20.1
Missing	12	4.1
Total	293	100
Educational Level		
Primary level	2	0.7
Basic level	15	5.1
High Scholl	137	46.8
Bachelor	121	41.3
Master Degree	16	5.5
Missing	2	0.7
Total	293	100

### Measures

*Socio-demographic questionnaire* – It consists of 15 questions about the participants characteristics (sex, age, nationality, marital status, household), their place of residence and place of birth

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(urban/rural, geographic region) and socio-economic level (subjects job, parents job, subjects education level, education level of the parents, job condition).

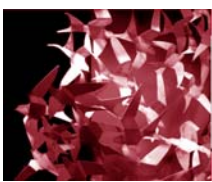
*Brief COPE* – To assess coping styles, we used the Portuguese adaptation of Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) which was performed by Pais-Ribeiro and Rodrigues (2004). The measure consists of a self-report inventory with an open response question in which subjects were asked to identify a recent problem and 28 items that measure 14 conceptually differentiable coping reactions (Using Instrumental Support; Self-Distraction; Planning; Denial; Religion; Using Emotional Support; Behavioral Disengagement; Active Coping; Venting; Positive Reframing; Substance Use; Acceptance; Self-Blame; Humor). In all, the instrument has 14 scales, each of which consists of 2 items. With regard to the format of the items, these can be written in terms of the action that the subject has implemented in a given situation “I did this” (which allows evaluating situational coping) or the strategies that subjects usually use “I usually do this” (if the researcher wants to assess dispositional coping). The answers are listed in an ordinal scale (from 0 the 3) with four alternatives. Once we had an interest in assessing coping styles, we have opted for the following possibilities: *I usually never do this; I do this at times; I usually do this a lot; I usually do this always*. Total score is not calculated from a global note but the total score is obtained in each subscale. A comparison between the values of the Internal Alpha Consistency of adaptation to the Portuguese population and the values of the present study is presented in Table 2. As the subscales “Planning” and “Self-Blame” did not assured adequate reliability values, it was decided that these scales would not be included in the analyses.

Table 2. Internal Alpha Consistency of *Brief COPE*: comparison between the values of adaptation to the Portuguese population and the values of the present study

Brief COPE scales	Values of adaptation to the Portuguese population	Values of the present study
Using Instrumental Support	.81	.73
Humor	.83	.71
Self-Distraction	.67	.70
Planning	.70	.52
Denial	.72	.66
Religion	.80	.79
Using Emotional Support	.79	.74
Behavioral Disengagement	.78	.62
Active Coping	.65	.62
Self-Blame	.62	.49
Positive Reframing	.75	.67
Substance Use	.81	.81
Venting	.84	.72
Acceptance	.55	.61

*Psychological Well-Being Scales* – To access well-being we used the Portuguese version of Riff's (1989b) Psychological Well-Being Scales which was performed by Ferreira and Simões (1999). The measure consists of a self-report inventory that contains six scales: Autonomy, Self-Acceptance, Environmental Mastery, Purpose in Life, Positive Relations and Personal Growth. In all, the instrument has 84 items that are quoted on a Likert type scale with six points [(1) Strongly disagree; (2) Moderately disagree; (3) Slightly disagree; (4) Slightly agree; (5) Moderately agree; (6) Strongly agree]. Each scale consists of positive items and negative items. To calculate total score for each scale, negative items were reverse coded and each scale items were summed; higher scores reflected higher levels of each well-being dimension. A comparison between the values of the Internal Alpha Consistency of adaptation to the Portuguese population and the values of the present study is presented in Table 3.





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Table 3. Internal Alpha Consistency of *Psychological Well-Being Scales*: comparison between the values of adaptation to the Portuguese population and the values of the present study

Psychological Well-Being scales	Values of adaptation to the Portuguese population	Values of the present study
Autonomy	.83	.84
Personal Growth	.69	.82
Self-Acceptance	.88	.87
Environmental Mastery	.78	.80
Positive Relations	.84	.84
Purpose in Life	.80	.79
Scales total score	.94	.96

*Procedure*

The study follows cross-sectional design with self-report measures. The sample was composed by convenience sampling method due to the resources available to perform the process of data collection between the months of February and April 2011. Participants were contacted through their work (e. g., educational institutions, healthcare facilities, commercial areas), educational institution (e. g., University of Coimbra) and through the researchers informal network. The administration of the protocol was preceded by a brief presentation about the study and ethical guidelines followed.

Taking into consideration the importance of knowing the characteristics of the sample for the choice of statistical procedures to be applied, some preliminary analyses were carried out, namely, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with correction of Lilliefors and Shapiro-Wilk Test to test the normality of sampling distributions. The statistical treatment of the data was performed with version 17.0 SPSS program for Windows.

**RESULTS**

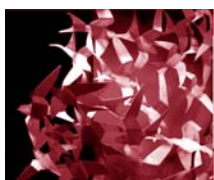
Descriptive statistics (mean values and standard deviation) for coping styles and psychological well-being in the sample are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Mean values and standard deviation of *coping styles*

Styles of coping	N	M	SD
Using Instrumental Support	293	2.45	.724
Humor	293	2.26	.715
Self-Distraction	293	2.34	.712
Denial	293	1.66	.710
Religion	293	1.89	.827
Use Emotional Support	293	2.56	.759
Behavioral Disengagement	293	1.41	.588
Active Coping	293	3.01	.661
Positive Reframing	293	2.71	.713
Substance Use	293	1.20	.524
Venting	293	2.34	.659
Acceptance	293	2.60	.679

Table 5. Mean values and standard deviation of *psychological well-being*

Psychological well-being	N	M	SD
Autonomy	293	4.48	.750
Personal Growth	293	4.90	.626
Self-Acceptance	293	4.50	.826
Environmental Mastery	293	4.40	.676
Positive Relations	293	4.71	.734
Purpose in Life	293	4.42	.703

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Styles of coping with lower mean values are Substance Use, Behavioral Disengagement, Denial and Religion. Active Coping style presents the highest mean value. Concerning psychological well-being, the dimension that ranked higher was Personal Growth. In general subjects show good levels of psychological well-being.

*Relationship between psychological well-being and socio-demographic variables*

As socio-demographic variables considered (age, educational level and socio-economic level) had a non-parametric distribution, Hypothesis 1 was tested by Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (Table 6).

Table 6. Correlations (Spearman) between *psychological well-being* and *socio-demographic variables*

Variables	Autonomy	Personal Growth	Acceptance Pessoal	Environmental Mastery	Positive Relations	Purpose Life	in
Age	.223**	.148*	.195**	.326**	.074	.228**	
Educational level	.088	.137*	.094	.080	.073	.140*	
Socio-economic level	.072	.048	.095	.144*	.137*	.091	

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01

Positive and statistically significant correlations were found between each socio-demographic variable and psychological well-being dimensions, although only weak correlations support the first hypothesis. Age is the variable that shows a stronger association with the dimensions of psychological well-being.

*Relationship between psychological well-being and coping*

Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to test Hypothesis 2 (Table 7).

Table 7. Correlations (Pearson) between *psychological well-being* and *coping styles*

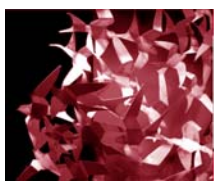
Variables	Autonomy	Personal Growth	Acceptance Pessoal	Environmental Mastery	Positive Relations	Purpose Life	in
Using Instrumental Support	-.081	.111	.018	-.008	.130*	.091	
Humor	-.011	-.025	.049	.018	-.061	-.041	
Self-Distracton	-.164**	-.134*	-.139*	-.150**	-.139*	-.130*	
Denial	-.244**	-.299**	-.270**	-.247**	-.244**	-.218**	
Religion	-.099	-.050	-.038	-.037	-.071	.021	
Use Emotional Support	-.122*	.068	-.054	-.050	.139*	.044	
Behavioral Disengagement	-.422**	-.459**	-.439**	-.459**	-.335**	-.423**	
Active Coping	.287**	.379**	.360**	.382**	.200**	.375**	
Positive Reframing	.081	.166**	.205**	.213**	.085	.160**	
Substance Use	-.327**	-.403**	-.295**	-.331**	-.307**	-.268**	
Venting	-.159**	-.093	-.198**	-.199**	-.101	-.092	
Acceptance	-.035	.064	.056	.075	-.001	.042	

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01

Dimensions of psychological well-being are mostly positively correlated with Active Coping and Positive Reframing and negatively correlated with Behavioral Disengagement, Denial, Substance Use and Distracton, which confirms the hypothesis of the existence of associations between specific dimensions of psychological well-being and the different styles of coping.

*Predictors of psychological well-being*

Hypothesis 3, 4 and 5 were tested through multiple hierarchical regression analysis. The study



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of correlations, which was previously done, allowed to realize which significant variables (socio-demographic and coping styles) should be introduced in each performed block of multiple hierarchical regression analysis. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis was performed for each dimension of well-being (Tables 8 to 13). Only the marital status, as socio-demographic factor, was not introduced in the analysis due to its colinearity with the factor age. Given the nature of the hypotheses, socio-demographic variables were introduced in block 1 and coping styles in block 2.

Autonomy

Table 8. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Autonomy* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	B	T	B	SEB	β	T
Age	.011	.003	.186***	3.227	.004	.003	.066	1.224
Sex Female	.205	.092	.128*	2.223	.295	.086	.184***	3.425
Behavioral Disengagement					-.332	.081	-.261***	-4.097
Active Coping					.219	.064	.193***	3.434
Positive Reframing					-.122	.086	-.085	-1.418
Denial					-.058	.059	-.055	-.983
Self-Distraction					-.103	.057	-.097	-1.793
Venting					-.077	.064	-.068	-1.1204
Use Emotional Support					-.101	.056	-.102	-1.801
R <sup>2</sup>			.053				.283	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.046				.260	
F			7.913				12.764	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.053***				.230***	

\*p ≤.05 \*\*p ≤.01 \*\*\*p ≤.001

Personal Growth

Table 9. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Personal Growth* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	β	T	B	SEB	β	T
Age	.005	.003	.114	1.950	-.001	.002	-.027	-.531
Educational Level	.119	.052	.135*	2.298	.086	.045	.098	1.932
Sex Female	.145	.078	.109	1.856	.174	.067	.131**	2.604
Behavioral Disengagement					-.232	.064	-.218***	-3.621
Substance Use					-.229	.068	-.192***	-3.277
Active Coping					.223	.054	.235***	4.130
Denial					-.107	.046	-.121*	-2.297
Positive Reframing					.069	.048	.079	1.447
Self-Distraction					-.093	.047	-.106*	-1.968
R <sup>2</sup>			.046				.358	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.036				.337	
F			4.540				22.323	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.046**				.312***	

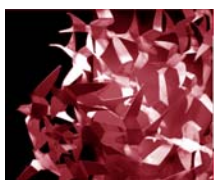
\*p ≤.05 \*\*p ≤.01 \*\*\*p ≤.001

Self-Acceptance

Table 10. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Self-Acceptance* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	β	T	B	SEB	β	T
Age	.009	.004	.145*	2.481	.001	.003	.024	.454
Behavioral Disengagement					-.327	.088	-.233***	-3.730
Active Coping					.257	.074	.206***	3.463
Substance Use					-.140	.091	-.089	-1.533
Denial					-.117	.064	-.101	-1.829
Positive Reframing					.150	.066	.130*	2.284
Venting					-.172	.066	-.137**	-2.614
Self-Distraction					-.091	.062	-.079	-1.466
R <sup>2</sup>			.021				.298	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.018				.278	
F			6.158				15.724	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.021**				.277***	

\*p ≤.05 \*\*p ≤.01 \*\*\*p ≤.001



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**Environmental Mastery**

Table 11. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Environmental Mastery* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	β	T	B	SEB	B	T
Age	.014	.003	.272***	4.707	.008	.003	.159**	3.104
Socio-economic Level	.151	.074	.117*	2.025	.101	.064	.079	1.571
Behavioral Disengagement					-.264	.070	-.230***	-3.754
Active Coping					.214	.059	.210***	3.604
Substance Use					-.162	.074	-.126*	-2.198
Denial					-.041	.052	-.043	-.797
Positive Reframing					.108	.053	-.113*	2.043
Venting					-.141	.053	-.138**	-2.689
Self-Distraction					-.067	.050	-.070	-1.336
R <sup>2</sup>			0.95				.357	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.088				.335	
F			14.308				15.550	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.095***				.262**	

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01 \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**Positive Relations**

Table 12. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Positive Relations* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	β	T	B	SEB	β	T
Socio-economic level	.181	.083	.129*	2.178	.169	.077	.121*	2.201
Behavioral Disengagement					-.218	.084	-.175**	-2.609
Substance Use					-.273	.088	-.195**	-3.121
Denial					-.122	.061	-.118*	-2.007
Active Coping					.062	.067	.055	.923
Use Emotional Support					.133	.073	.138	1.822
Self-Distraction					.091	.078	.090	1.165
R <sup>2</sup>			.017				.216	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.013				.192	
F			4.742				9.847	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.017*				.199***	

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01 \*\*\*p ≤ .001

**Purpose in Life**

Table 13. Multiple hierarchical regression analysis to study *Purpose in Life* predictors

Variables	Block 1				Block 2			
	B	SEB	β	T	B	SEB	β	T
Age	.011	.003	.203***	3.533	.005	.003	.090	1.720
Educational Level	.124	.057	.125*	2.162	.093	.052	.094	1.785
Sex Female	.159	.087	.106	1.832	.229	.079	.152**	2.904
Behavioral Disengagement					-.312	.075	-.261***	-4.133
Active Coping					.259	.063	.244***	4.083
Substance Use					-.040	.080	-.030	-.499
Denial					-.054	.055	-.055	-.988
Positive Reframing					.053	.056	.054	.942
Self-Distraction					-.122	.056	-.123*	-2.185
R <sup>2</sup>			.071				.296	
R <sup>2</sup> Adj.			.061				.273	
F			7.187				14.715	
ΔR <sup>2</sup>			.071***				.225***	

\*p ≤ .05 \*\*p ≤ .01 \*\*\*p ≤ .001

Multiple hierarchical regression analyses, conducted for each dimension of psychological well-being (Tables 8 to 13), confirmed that socio-demographic variables explain a reduced proportion of the variance of psychological well-being, as predicted by Hypothesis 3. When coping styles were introduced in block 2 of each well-being dimension analysis, coping styles influenced the relationship between socio-demographic factors and the psychological well-being (Hypothesis 4). Besides,





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coping styles produce a greater effect on the variance of well-being. Finally, it was observed that certain styles of coping are predictors of higher levels of psychological well-being (Hypothesis 5), while others are negative predictors of well-being.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As referred in previous studies (e. g. Diener & Suh, 1997; Ryan & Diener, 2009; Ryff, 1989b), socio-demographic factors explain a reduced proportion of the variance of psychological well-being. Nevertheless, when socio-demographic variables are observed alone in block 1, getting older, as it can be understood as having higher age, becomes a predictor of Autonomy, Self-Acceptance, Environmental Mastery and Purpose in Life, which corroborates the data found in previous studies (Ryff, 1989b). This result earns greater sense when considering that the psychological well-being model that influences the present study is guided by an interpretation of *eudaimonia* where *daimon* is achieved through a process of personal development (Ryff, 1989b), and also that a significant sample of middle-aged adults and elderly participated in the empirical formulation of what is well-being (cf. Ryff, 1989a, 1989b). On the other hand, the fact that being a woman appears as a predictor of Autonomy refers, possibly, to the roles played by women in modern society. Women are responsible for a great number of tasks (e. g. home care, family, emotional relationships management, professional tasks) and, from an early age, they are encouraged to have an autonomous behavior in diverse functioning areas. Finding that an increase in academic qualifications predicts Personal Growth and Purpose in Life, reinforces the structural role that education play in the development of personality and well-being. Access to education provides humans the expansion of personal horizons and life projects. As increase in the Socio-Economic level is a predictor of Environmental Mastery and Positive Relations, suggests that those in a socio-economic disadvantaged group may consider their well-being and health at risk (cf. Ryff et al., 1999).

The results presented support the idea that coping explains a significant part of the variance of well-being. For that reason we believe individuals can play an active role in the promotion of their well-being. Regarding the analysis carried out, Active Coping is a positive predictor of all dimensions of psychological well-being, with the exception of Positive Relations. These data support the adaptive function of this coping style (cf. Karademas, 2007; Tsenkova et al., 2008). Also Positive Reframing plays a protective role in Self-Acceptance and Environmental Mastery, which again would be expected taking into account previous studies (cf. Karademas, 2007; Karekla & Panayiotou, 2011). Being able to build positive meaning can empower individuals to undertake behaviors that manage their problems and, in a way, increase their perception of mastery.

As was noted in previous work, the present study shows that Self-Distraction, Denial, Behavioral Disengagement, Venting, and Substance Use may be considered risk factors for well-being (cf. Karademas, 2007; Karekla & Panayiotou, 2011). Reflecting these trends avoidance coping styles, it could be relevant to point out that, on the contrary, meeting well-being is to play approach behaviors, actions that use stress inducing factors and developmental contexts where personal skills can be used to increase development (Ramos, 2005). Therefore, the intervention strategies must be designed in such a way to help individuals to invest in proactive behaviors and cognitive frames where some stressful developmental tasks are seen as opportunities to benefit personal growth. To conclude, styles of coping and the psychological well-being are better understood if taken as processes that characterize personal development.

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