

Differences in Coping Styles

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A major obstacle couples experience in dealing with their chronic problems is the different coping styles they utilize in attempting to address them. These coping styles typically evolve out of what each partner has discovered about what best maintains his or her own emotional stability.

Core Differences

Atkinson (2005) found that there are generally five core differences in the ways in which couples maintain emotional stability that most frequently lay beneath their gridlocked conflict. The first of these differences involves the extent to which a partner's most basic inclination is to operate independently or to operate side-by-side of their mate.

Independence-First vs. Togetherness-First. When stressed, independence-first partners need space in order to be able to think things through. In contrast, togetherness-first people gravitate immediately toward others, and seek a measure of emotional comfort which then helps them to cope with stressful events.

Future-First vs. Live For the Moment. A second core difference area involves how much partners feel they should delay present gratification for the sake of investing in future happiness. Some partners function best by delaying enjoyment until they have fulfilled all of their responsibilities. Others function best when they combine work and play. The second style prioritizes enjoyment of each moment more highly than the first style.

Predictability-First vs. Spontaneity-First. Another core difference that often generates gridlock involves the extent of predictability or structure that is needed in daily life. Predictability-first partners function best when they are able to minimize disorder, and organize their lives in predictable ways. Spontaneity-first partners thrive on the unexpected, and typically have vigorous neural circuits for play, which are easily activated.

Slow-to-Upset vs. Readily-Upset. Partners often differ with regard to how upset they let themselves get about undesirable circumstances. Readily-upset partners experience upset feelings frequently and intensely, and use their upset feelings to motivate them to become agents of change. In contrast, slow-to-upset partners have internal mechanisms that attenuate upset feelings as soon as they occur.

Problem-Solving-First vs. Understanding-First. Problem-solving-first people see little value in dwelling on negative feelings, regardless of whether the feelings are their own or their partners'. They rely predominately on problem-solving as a means of feeling better. Understanding-first partners want their uncomfortable feelings to be soothed by understanding and validation. For these partners, it's a matter of timing: validation and understanding come first; developing a plan of action comes second.

Managing Coping Differences

Differences in coping styles are often experienced as insensitivities or injustices, because each partner's way of maintaining emotional stability interferes with the other's way of maintaining stability. As Atkinson (2005) points out, rather than seeing a partner's behavior as arising from different ways of maintaining emotional stability, each partner interprets the other's behavior from within his or her own framework, and the other person appears as uncaring and controlling. "I would never disrespect my partner the way in which she treats me!", or "I would never get upset about something as minor as that!" This is an easy mistake to make. In a sense, each partner is just following the Golden Rule. The only problem is that there is more than one way to cope effectively with life.

When these differences are successfully addressed, they provide the foundation for an alternative to the pathologizing explanation that each partner has for the other's behavior. Specifically, when these adjustments in thinking about the other partner are made, each partner is able to say to themselves something like the following: "My partner wants to do things his way because if he tried to do things my way, it would mess him up, not because there's something wrong with him, but rather because he has a different way of navigating life than I do. I think it would mess me up, too, if I tried to do things the way that he wants me to. This isn't about right or wrong, it's about the different ways in which we manage stress in our lives" (Atkinson, 2005).

References

Atkinson, B. J. (2005). *Emotional intelligence in couples therapy*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.