The Theory behind *Zippy’s Friends*:

The Concept of Coping

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The most important concept behind *Zippy's Friends* is coping – how we respond to difficulties and stress. It is a topic which has been the subject of many studies over the past 50 years, and one of the most influential approaches was developed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984). They defined coping strategies as ‘cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person.’

In any situation, we first assess what it means for us, and our perceptions can differ widely. For example, jumping out of an aeroplane with a parachute would be stressful for some people, but others see it as a fun recreational activity. If our first assessment of an event shows that it could be difficult, stressful or even dangerous, we automatically engage in a process to determine how we will cope with it.

Again, we all respond differently. For example, after a conflict, some people will want to distract themselves by thinking of something else – running errands, perhaps, or watching TV – so that they don't have to deal with the situation. Some will do things to calm themselves down, such as taking a bath, having a glass of alcohol or going jogging. Others will ask friends for advice or do things to actively resolve the conflict (Aldwin, 2007; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Clearly, some coping strategies are more effective than others. For example, going to the cinema or getting drunk after a conflict may help us feel better for a short time, but will not improve the situation in the long term. However, it is impossible to simply categorise coping strategies as fundamentally good or bad. For example, while denying the reality of the situation is often considered an inappropriate coping strategy, it can be very effective. In fact, studies have shown that people who go through high-risk
cardiac surgery but deny its seriousness tend to be less anxious and have better chances of recovery than people who face the risks head-on (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

We all face difficulties and stressful situations, ranging from minor daily annoyances to major disruptions such as divorce or bereavement, and studies indicate that children and adults who have a wider range of coping skills have fewer negative experiences as a result of these situations. Being able to choose from several coping strategies is associated with fewer mental health problems in children (Holen et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2010). The ability to evaluate which coping skills work better in certain situations, and consequently to pick the ‘best’ strategies, makes it easier for us to adapt to different life stages. As children grow older, the development of their intellectual abilities allows them to better decide which strategies are best in different situations (Derryberry et al., 2003; Skinner & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2009). When a person has a broad repertoire of coping skills and uses different strategies to cope in different situations, they are considered to having ‘coping flexibility’, and recent research (Cheng, Lau & Chan, 2014) has shown that having such flexibility is associated with positive outcomes when confronted with difficult situations.

Studies on coping often distinguish between strategies which focus on decreasing the negative feelings a person has after a difficult or stressful situation (‘emotion-focused coping’) and strategies which attempt to improve or change the situation (‘action-focused coping’).

Emotion-focused strategies involve anything a person does to feel better or less stressed. These strategies do not change the reality of the situation, and are used simply to avoid painful or difficult feelings or to help the person feel better. Examples include: expressing feelings to an empathetic friend, getting drunk, going to the movies, going shopping, going for a run, meditating, taking medication to reduce anxiety, and anything else we may try in order to feel better or less distressed.

Action-focused coping strategies include all the things we do to try to change and improve a situation. These include: asking friends for help or advice, investing in new activities or relationships, and actively trying to resolve the conflict or problem (for example, by making a compromise, suggesting arbitration, trying to convince the other person, giving a gift, or getting help from someone else).

Coping is a constant process of trying different ways to deal with a situation. It is usually an automatic process – we don’t think about it – and we often try out several different strategies until we feel better. However, we can learn to actively think about, and discuss how best to cope with, specific situations. Coping successfully can depend on a
Some researchers talk about how people cope with problems under the topic of ‘resilience.’ Resilience has been defined in many different ways, but generally concerns all things that enhance the experience of wellbeing when people face significant adversity (Ungar, 2011a,b; Zautra, Hall, & Murray, 2010). A common theme in studies of resilience (Aburn, Gott & Hoare, 2016) is the idea that more resilient people adapt and adjust better to adversity. Some resilience research emphasizes individual capacities and behaviours, such as coping skills, as the key to adaptation. Other studies examine social-environmental factors, such as whether social supports and professional help are available, either alone or in combination with individual characteristics. Some aspects of resilience cannot be taught or easily changed, such as having traumatic early childhood experiences, supportive parents and positive role models. However, research on Zippy’s Friends has convincingly demonstrated that the programme can increase children’s coping skills and lead to improvements in social skills, the classroom environment and behaviours associated with educational achievement.

Zippy’s Friends has been extensively evaluated in a number of studies which have shown that the effects of problems encountered by children are related to their ability to cope and, importantly, that Zippy’s Friends can increase those abilities (Clarke, Bunting & Barry, 2014; Denoncourt, 2012; Dufour, Denoncourt, & Mishara, 2011; Holen, Waaktaar, Lervåg & Ystgaard, 2012; Mishara & Ystgaard, 2010; Wong, 2008; Monkeviciené, Mishara, & Dufour, 2006). If children are able to widen their range of coping strategies and become adept at using different ones – especially asking for and accepting help – they will integrate these skills into their lives, so that they will continue to help them through adolescence and adulthood.

Interest in teaching coping skills at an early age is based on studies showing that even children aged four or five are capable of envisioning several solutions for dealing with daily problems and choosing between different coping strategies. Children who are able to think of a larger number of coping skills are better equipped to use them more often in ‘real’ daily situations. Research on Zippy’s Friends has confirmed that children generally like to participate in activities that teach them to cope, and that they often experience improvements in their quality of life and relationships after participating in these activities.
However, it is important to note that teaching children how to cope does not mean teaching them that one coping strategy is good and another bad. The goal is rather to teach children to come up with many different ways of dealing with various situations and to judge for themselves what may happen if they cope in certain ways.

By seeing how characters in the Zippy stories cope in different ways, and by experiencing this for themselves in role plays and other activities, children become better equipped to choose more effective strategies. When they successfully handle one difficult situation, they increase their abilities to adapt to future situations, and this can improve their self-esteem, feelings of competence and general well-being.

References:


