

## DISTRACTION AS A FACTOR OF RIDDANCE OF DIFFICULT LIFE SITUATION IMPACTS



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**Abstract.** Social and psychological situations mounded by natural, political and economic factors are characterized by deep cultural and historical, social and economic, legal and other world-scale shocks and omnipresent breakage, re-evaluation and re-building of the heretofore-customary tenor of social life. Such states give rise to difficult life situations.

Difficult life situations that will require the humankind to make many efforts to overcome; these efforts will include the need to choose optimum strategies of behavior in a rapidly changing reality.

The reaction of individuals and communities to DLS can take the shapes of the coping behavior and the problem-oriented behavioral strategies, with the latter having the highest effect from improving their skills of working with the objective material as well as a constructive behavior training (destruction of behavioral stereotypes hindering internalizations of positive experience; searching and fixating positive and successful behavior; adding to the repertoire of the coping-type behavioral patterns) as well as the subject-oriented behavioral strategies, generation of self-regulation skills (keeping engaged in a situation; forming the skills of voluntary concentration of attention and mobilizations of resources; learning how to relax and shed nervous strain) and receipt of emotional support (discussing the experiences; the opportunity to react to negative emotions, expand the vision spectrum and the attitude to the testing situation alike; discussing the ways to cope with a negative emotional state (humor, the maximum predictability of a situation) work better for them.

**Keywords:** *psychological situations, coping behavior, emotional support, self-regulation skills, COVID-19.*

## Introduction

The modern social and psychological situation formed due to the effects of a good many global natural, political and economic factors is characterized by deep cultural and historical, social and economic, legal and other world-scale shocks and omnipresent breakage, re-evaluation and re-building of the heretofore-customary tenor of social life.

This situation has also been further steepened during the seven or eight months since December 2019, by the emergence and social dominance of yet another global and, shall we say, out-of-the-ordinary, unrespectable and unforeseeable force majeure of the most destructive nature. At least, the *COVID-19*<sup>1</sup> pandemic does appear to be insurmountable now.

The serious political, economic, academic and other circles already have developed the opinion, rooted in the current condition of the society and the nature of the pandemic in general, that the post-pandemic social life will be very different from the pre-pandemic one! They are inclined to expect an all-out re-evaluation of the universal system of values, societally as well as individually, and of the ethical, economic, political and legal etch foundation of the modern public order.

The said forces majeure have as their inevitable consequence the previously unheard-of degrees of complexity and gravity of life situations, their changed structure and nature, and the increased frequency of occurrence with a tendency to become dominant. Such new features of the so-called *difficult life situations* that will require the humankind to make many efforts to overcome; these efforts will include the need to choose optimum strategies of behavior in a rapidly changing reality.

It is our considered opinion that the question of the psychological (socio-psychological) features (characteristics) of the perception of such situations and that of the individual (group) emotional perceptibility are central to the complicated, albeit not chaotic, entanglement of questions and issues arising from such situations. This is because the positive or negative outcome of the 'battle' pressed upon the society will in many respects depend on the correct juxtaposition of those two questions.

The presumed or forecast choice by an individual of this or that behavioral strategy in a specific difficult life situation taken from a final 'recommended' set of such situations is effectively defined by his or her individual psychological traits pertaining to the different strata of his or her life and activity (to be specific, the individual temperamental characteristics representing the psychophysiological stratum and the generalized personal features of the psychosocial level – the locus of control and direction of a person. That is if we do not consider such moments that emanate from the very essence of the underlying social and psychological characteristics of the experienced situation.

At the same time, any given life situation, let alone a difficult one, can trigger the rather complex dynamic mechanisms of conceptual processes demanding that the affected person should take specific 'sensible' steps and make the changes required to achieve a certain goal and attain the unavoidable transition to a qualitatively new stage of the search for a new identity, rethinking one's life path and making a new picture of the latter.

**Research methodology.** The methodological analysis of this socio-psychological phenomenon carried out by researchers provides for the consideration of life situations as elaborate structures that incorporate the following three levels:

- a) Life situation as the necessary precondition for a specific human being is life.
- b) Life situation as a milestone of a personal life path;
- c) Formation of an individual attitude to a situation.

**Literature review.** The very concept of 'a situation' (Latin *situs* – position, situation, and location) represents a system of the conditions external to an active subject that evoke and mediate a person's activity. This term is firmly accepted in the sciences about humans (jurisprudence, pedagogics, psychology and psychotherapy).

Though oft-used, though, the 'situation' concept is far from being construed uniformly because some interpret it as 'by default' or 'granted' without attaching specific definitions to it while others opt for extreme simplification and equate the concept to 'environment', 'a set of circumstances' and 'a system of external conditions triggering and mediating a person's activities.'

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<sup>1</sup> *COVID-19 (Corona Virus Disease 2019)*, formerly the 2019-nCoV corona virus infection – a potentially grave and acute respiratory infection caused by the corona virus SARS-CoV-2 (2019-nCoV).

The definition of the situation as a spatial-temporal construct is adopted the widest in the modern psychological research. In this case, the situation is taken a compendium of environmental elements at a specific stage of a person's vital function.

However, the new, the so-called 'personal-situational' approach has been gaining ground in psychology; thereby, the situation is regarded as the result of active interaction of a person and the external conditions of his or her existence (Burlachuk, Korzhova, 1998).

Besides, one cannot but accept the incontestable condition or, should we say, the axiom of life that practically everyone will encounter (and repeatedly, too) such life situations as he or she would subjectively experience as difficult ones, those that derange the usual course of life and are described as 'difficult' or 'difficult' life situations therefore.

Remarkably, the term 'difficult life situation' (DLS) is one of the terms used most often in the psychological, sociopsychological and psychotherapeutic literature.

The above notwithstanding, the absence of a cut-and-dried definition of this concept is admitted to as well.

The authors that use it in their work avoid an exacting formulation but emphasized its informative aspects, namely:

- A dramatic disruption of a person's customary lifestyle;
- No coincidence of a person's needs and capacities, on the one hand, and the current activity conditions, on the other;
- The emergence (and, most importantly, comprehension) of the need to undertake a serious internal work and to have external support to adapt to a new life situation.

The issues of the socio-psychological nature of a difficult life situation, the conditions and character of its social and individual determination and the ways to manage a difficult life situation become the central psychological research problems.

As regards the practical and applied aspect of the topic in focus, it is about the strategies and technologies of coping with difficult life situations.

As was mentioned above, the academic (psychological, pedagogic, sociological and philosophical) literature is devoid of a unified concept of the very notion of a difficult (complex) life situation. Let us now quote some of the definitions, which, in the opinion

of their authors, characterize the essence of the DLS:

- The DLS is considered a manifestation of social instability characterized as stress-producing, recessionary, extremal, critical, crossover and indefinite (Tonkushina, 2017);
- The DLS is characterized as an impossibility situation in which a person encounters problems whilst attempting to actualize his/her personal needs in his/her life (also, motives, drives, values, etc) (Vasilios, 1984).

The DLS amounts to the incongruence (discrepancy) between what a person wishes (to do, achieve, etc) and what he/she is capable of having found himself/herself in given circumstances and possessing his/her own capabilities. This incongruence obstructs the achievement of a goal set originally, with the resulting negative emotions that serve as a material indicator of the difficulty of this or that situation for such a person (Lazarus, 1970).

The wide spread of the notion of 'a difficult life situation' as well as its use in other fields of expertise defines the statement of another issue, namely, of identifying the purely psychological aspect of the enquiry into the problem.

Evidently, the psychological enquiry will be not in an objective situation but in the 'subjective representation of the picture of a situation in an individual mind.' How the subject perceives a situation and what attitude he/she takes towards it is summarized as 'cognitive assessment' in modern science. It is also emphasized that it is the subjective assessment of a situation (rather than the objective event) that determines the choice of a copying behavior strategy.

The research into the overcoming of difficult life situations and the coping behavior strategies as a factor of a person's successful adaptation to the modern changing world assumes the special importance in this connection. The problem of the study of coping behavior is becoming an increasingly pressing matter in the overseas as well as local psychology because of the modern humans' disposition to keep their vital activities efficient in difficult life situations.

(The following should be mentioned, as it seems rather important for the study of this phenomenon: the people in possession of the

individual selective perception of the reality they live in (and, consequently, also of life situations) assess and describe it differently. Each person has his/her special set of characteristics and approaches to describing a difficult life situation and such personified sets do not necessarily conform to the objective properties of the situation that is being described. More often than not, the objective difficulty of a situation may be at discrepancy with its subjective perception).

Thus, it is precisely the personal perception of what takes place and the individual assessment plane that a person applies to various parameters of a situation that underlie the differentiation of life situations, their classification and the defining of a form that a subjective activity assumes. They also define how a given person (or a group, sometimes) will characterize a given life situation.

The Russian-speaking literature on our subject describes various approaches to assessing the difficult life situation. For instance, A. I. Prikhidko singles out the following principal forms of personal perception of the difficult life situation (Prikhidko, 2001):

- first of all, it is the perception form whereby a person recognizes an established life situation as 'difficult to overcome', and recreates 'a non-constructive experience model' for himself/herself whilst also defining the established situation as 'an unpleasant event', 'a blow', something that causes 'shock' and is accompanied by 'grievance' inevitably. Given this form of perception, the affected person never once thinks of transitioning to constructive modes of behavior, such that would be aimed at overcoming a given situation successfully;
- secondly, the difficult life situation is taken as 'easy to overcome', in which case the affected person generates 'a constructive experience model' and though 'shock' and 'grievance' are mentioned here, too, the person succeeds in overcoming the depressed condition and progressing to putting constructive methods in use;
- thirdly, when a person regards the difficult life situation as 'easy to overcome', he/she creates 'the constructive attitude model' whereby a DLS is so objectively but is not subjectively perceived as such: the affected person has no acute and unpleasant sensations but transitions to

constructive behavior shortly upon the emergence of the difficult life situation.

The proponents of another approach argue that individual perception influences how a human mind builds up the image of a difficult life situation. Such objective events as presuppose the spatial-temporal context and certain conditions (including social ones) are moulded into a subjective plan in the shape of the sensations in different modalities, which assume the shape of a sensual image. The image becomes meaningful and is given its attributes via the processes of perception, thinking and cognition in general (Bityutskaya, 2013).

Consequently, an individual image formed in a subjective mind and the comprehended image of a difficult life situation are at the core of how a person defines the subsequent choice of strategies for behavior in such a situation. That is, '...if a situation is assessed by a subject as a life difficulty, then, the coping behavior or, possibly, a super-situation activity is actualized.' (Bean, 2011).

Referring to the classification by overseas researchers, L. I. Antsiferova identifies the three main types of life difficulties:

1. Everyday annoyances.
2. Negative events linked to various periods in life and age changes (a failure to enroll at a university, demotion, resignation);
3. Unforeseen hardships and grievances (a dangerous disease, an irreparable damage, a tragic loss) (Antsiferova, 1994).

The concept of *social exclusion* in use in overseas academic sources and programmed documents can be employed as analogous to the 'difficult life situation'. The social exclusion is construed as 'a complex and complicated process incorporating the lack of resources, rights, access to public benefits and services, the inability to participate in normal relations and activity available to the majority of people, including in economic, cultural, social and political activities, with the subsequent impact on persons' quality of life and on the equality and cohesion of a society in general (Zimbardo, 2004).

It should be mentioned that, despite the existing differences between the definitions quoted by the author, which definitions naturally do not exhaust the whole 'bouquet' of pertinent definitions of the concept of a difficult life situation, there are doubtless similar characteristics of this concept because such situations (Magomed-Eminov, 1996):

- Emergence where there is an imbalance in the 'person and its environment' system of relations;
- Are the factual reflection of an imbalance between a person's goals and aspirations, on the one hand, and the potential or real capabilities to achieve such goals and fulfil such aspirations;
- are components of the personal socialization processes;
- Put the greatly heightened demands to a person's abilities and capabilities as well as his/her potential (sometimes, beyond the personal potential);
- Derange the usual and established lifestyle of a person, stimulate his/her activity and set him/her before the need to transform the emerged situation.

Let us look at the structure of the phenomenon of a difficult life situation in order to see its full picture, as it were. Being a system organized in a certain manner, it incorporates the following components:

- participants of the events related to the system (meaning, perhaps, the person as the subjects of the events as well as his/her social environment);
- the activity of a person under the given circumstances;
- the temporal and spatial aspects of the situation a person is experiencing;
- The subjective feelings of a person and his/her interpretation of the life difficulty.

What is to be done? The way out of the labyrinth is somewhere near?

It is impossible to understand whether this is good or bad. Is it this or that? At any rate, however, this is one of those 'de facto' cases that must be borne in mind of necessity...

The difficult life situations are integral parts of the personal socialization processes, for a number of reasons. Namely,

- First of all, because they are generally and routinely present in the life 'luggage' of a person;
- Secondly, they do not always necessarily traumatize a person, contrary to the established belief;
- Thirdly, they define the dynamics of a person's life activities; moreover, they provide for progress upon the occurrence of such constructive changes that promote the achievement of new forms of well-balanced relations with one's environment, etc.

Various crises, regional conflicts, mass migrations, insecurity of tomorrow and so forth are the conditions under which personhood is achieved in our time. The high degree of ambiguity to social development leads to a specific person experiencing subjective (and, sometimes, also insurmountable) difficulties when determining his/her life prospects. Consequently, it is of vital sense to direct people to acquiring such behavioral strategies as would allow them to overcome all kinds of life problems constructively.

We are referring to the so-called 'coping' behavior. Nevertheless, what is it? Let us try to see...

*The coping behavior* is the ability of a person to overcome hardships, cope with rigours of the everyday life, become efficiently and purposefully adapted to life's complications and regulate his/her emotional state and behavior in such situations.

Various forms of the coping behavior are termed the *coping strategies* in the modern psychology. A special kind of social behavior ensuring the good health and well-being of a human being is taken as a coping behavior. Such behavior helps a person cope with stressful situations, routine difficulties and life problems through conscious acts aimed at active interaction with a situation at hand.

- Such interaction can be different in nature, for example:
- Changing the situation (when the latter is controllable);
- Adapting to the situation (when it is uncontrollable).

The basic coping strategies include problem solutions, the search for social support and avoidance. The strategies are also differentiated by the focus of the mind:

- On an emotion (the search for ways to preserve an emotional equilibrium and to command one's feelings);
- On assessment (determining the import and sense of a development to the person; assessment of possible consequences);
- On a problem (the person's desire to deal with the difficult situation directly; opposition to the stressors and their consequences).

It should be remembered that the person's choice of this or that behavioral strategy when encountering a difficult life situation depends on his/her individual psychological features pertaining to various levels of life activity

(temperamental characteristics representing the psychophysiological level and the generalized personal characteristics of the psychosocial level – the locus of control and the orientation of the person).

The overwhelming majority of the researchers into the coping behavior and the mechanisms of overcoming life difficulties and crises accentuate the following aspects of the behavior.

- a. The search for ways and opportunities to prevent difficult life situations;
- b. The psychological preparedness (as much as it is possible given, for instance, the unforeseeable nature of the absolute majority of the difficult life situations) for the anticipated (expected, forecast, etc.) and inescapable difficulties;
- c. Lastly, whether it is possible to preserve the psychic and physical resources of the person who finds himself/herself in a problematic situation.

At the same time, there are not enough many works to inquire into the difficult life situation as an event promoting personal sustenance and into the overcoming of the situation as a personal growth process with the latter taken as a subjective-active component of the former. Besides, the role of personal creative potential in the unfolding of a coping process remains understudied.

Even though the modern researchers classify the coping behavior as one of the understudied life-creating personal 'gifts' (Antsiferova, 1994) or the constructive powers thereof (Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, 1991), or the power that transforms the human activity related to the creative generation of new problematic situation solutions or exits (Kryukova, 2008), there are practically no academic publications researching the behavior as an act of creation and creation as one of the mechanisms of the coping process.

The study of the academic publications (English and Russian) on this field demonstrated the presence of a long enough range of coping behavior factors, such as: responsibility, independence, level of aspiration (*by the way, the 'personal level of aspiration' definition comes from the German-American psychologist Kurt Lewin*), *motivation of achievement (the first research into which was conducted by the American psychologist D McClelland (the 1950s)*; tolerance to ambiguity, resilience, a temperament type, the self-concept specificities, professional

experience and life-purpose orientations (having a goal in life and interest in life; satisfaction with self-actualization).

Thus, the list of the coping behavior factors is extremely diverse as we can see.

It should be mentioned that the coping, the DLS experiencing are unfolded over time and are not static structurally. That is to say, they are processes. When one studies such phenomena, one has to take into account the complexity and non-linearity of their inner structure and, on the other hand, remember of their dynamic nature.

The coping is understood as a process that changes over time and in situational context with the different contents; as the cognitive and behavioral efforts made in order to manage, a situation and either accept or avoid it.

The following features proved to be common for the coping and protective strategies: the backlink to emotionality in the intellectual sphere and the direct link to the overall amativeness. In other words, thusly is confirmed the notion of the adaptive role of the protective and coping mechanisms the common mission of which is to alleviate emotional tension, and of intensiveness and longevity of negative emotions haunting a person in the difficult life situations. However, the ways to achieve this common goal are different in the problem-oriented and subject-oriented protection and coping strategies.

The subject-oriented coping strategies are linked to the reduced sensibility to a discrepancy between the anticipated and actual results in the objective, intellectual and communicative areas.

The problem-oriented coping strategies are preferred by the people with the following temperamental properties: high psychomotor and intellectual ergodicity (i.e., the need in intense work, high muscular tone, involvement in an activity, drive to mental strain); high psychomotor plasticity (i.e., flexibility in switching from an activity form to another), drive for various activity forms, high rate of psychomotor behavior, high speed of intellectual processes in the course of intellectual activity, high activeness and a high general addictiveness. Such people are also characteristically oriented for interaction with others (Rusalova, 2012).

Those who prefer problem-oriented behavioral strategies have the highest effect from improving their skills of working with the objective material as well as a constructive

behavior training (destruction of behavioral stereotypes hindering internalization of positive experience; searching and fixating positive and successful behavior; adding to the repertoire of the coping-type behavioral patterns).

As regards those who prefer the subject-oriented behavioral strategies, generation of self-regulation skills (keeping engaged in a situation; forming the skills of voluntary concentration of attention and mobilization of resources; learning how to relax and shed nervous strain) and receipt of emotional support (discussing the experiences; the opportunity to react to negative emotions, expand the vision spectrum and the attitude to the testing situation alike; discussing the ways to cope with a negative emotional state (humour, the maximum predictability of a situation) work better for them.

There are the following four identified blocs of personal resources that shape the choice of a strategy of overcoming:

- physical (endurance);
- social (an individual social network; socially supportive systems);
- psychological (the locus of control, the level of reflexive abilities; motivation);
- Material (money, equipment).

One particularly important stage of working with a difficult situation is considering it as an opportunity to gain new experience, a new quality; determining its sense and educational impact. First, it is necessary to help the affected person shed the traditional negative view of a difficult situation as something unwarranted and demanding an immediate solution (Osukhova, 2012).

Therefore, one should have to know how to cope with external and internal difficulties successfully and be equally prepared for a test as well as a steep worsening of life circumstances. A person's activity manifesting itself in the forming of a personal life position, a life vector, a meaning of life and a life concept is the chief personal resource in a difficult situation.

**Discussion of research results.** The situation being uncontrollable has a strong enough negative impact on a planned solution approach to a problem and, at the same time, a material positive influence on the prominence of fantasizing and counting on external forces. When a situation is taken as one immune to one's own actions and beyond

control whilst one's own efforts are regarded as insufficient to change the situation, the person refuses to analyze the conditions, seek a solution, plan ways out and undertake energetic actions. It also becomes more probable that there will emerge a dream, a hope for a miracle, a hope pinned on a fate or on God.

Strong emotions, in turn, have a manifest on the actualizations of both avoidance strategies. This means that the intensity of distraction and fantasizing, of a hope on external forces rises as do negative emotions and tension. This is to be expected because the psychological defenses is a mechanism that is triggered when events evoke powerful emotional reactions.

The third link between coping and hopelessness has to do with distraction. According to the results at hand, this link does not determine the perception of a situation as a hopeless one. Departure and avoidance bring together diverse distraction methods ranging from attempting to make oneself feel better with food, alcohol, narcotics and smoking to switching to other activities (immersing oneself in work or working out, for instance). Whilst several studies have shown that self-intoxication with alcohol, narcotics and so forth is not efficient and only steepens a given situation (Rasskazova, 2011), there is no categorically unanimous opinion about the other ways.

So, whilst E. Washington and R. Kessler (Worthington, Kessler, 1991) showed that the avoidance increases the degree of emotional adaptation to the circumstances that cannot be changed or that are associated with a chronic stress, V. A. Brodog (2006) points out that the avoidance can alleviate a given condition if acting as an intermission during which the affected person gathers up strength. To our mind, distraction brings certain relief in some cases whilst also allowing one to become distanced from a situation in order to revisit it, take a fresh look at it, which can help find a solution. Therefore, depending on the degree of intensiveness and a specific distraction method in a given situation, the distraction can either intensify the sense of hopeless or reduce it. Therefore, we have not been able to confirm the assumption about the influence of this coping method on subjective hopelessness.

### Conclusions

Consideration of a difficult situation from the viewpoint of a person's fate in general should be the conceptual foundation for psychological assistance in a difficult life situation. K Jung said that big life problems are never solved forever. Moreover, this is just as well, too, because the meaning and existence of such problems consists in not solving them away but in a person working on them throughout his/her life. This is the essence of development. What follows is that it is possible to identify in anyone's fate the main lines around which his/her main life difficulties are concentrated. Consequently, regarding a specific difficult situation from the personal fate viewpoint in general means the following:

- a. Finding the problem's place on one of the main tension lines;
- b. Identifying the meaning of the problem's emergence and the educational, resource-deriving opportunities.

Consequently, the level of aspirations, a motivation to succeed and tolerance towards ambiguity are the factors that directly influence a coping behavior and a personal choice of coping strategies in an encounter with a stressful situation. The coping behavior and choice of certain coping strategies are formed depending on the character and set goals of a concrete person.

The photo legend says, 'There will be a new dawn – there will be a sea of victories! And never believe that there is no way out!'

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