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Abbott, J, Hurley, MA, Chadwick, H orcid.org/0000-0002-8022-5490 et al. (1 more author) (2022) Ways of coping and survival in Cystic Fibrosis: a 20-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Cystic Fibrosis*, 22 (1). pp. 112-118. ISSN 1569-1993

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcf.2022.04.011>

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Ways of coping and survival in Cystic Fibrosis: a 20-year longitudinal study

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Keywords: survival; coping; optimism; Cox model.

Highlights

1. Optimistic coping is an independent predictor of survival in CF.
2. Illustrative survival curves suggest that women with CF who report below average optimistic coping have the poorest survival outcomes.
3. Women employed more distraction coping than men, but this had no bearing on survival.
4. Ways of coping are modifiable, providing a target for clinical intervention to enhance optimistic coping and mitigate negative health outcomes.

Abstract

Background: The relationship between ways of coping and health outcomes has been a focus of interest for decades. There is increasing recognition that positive psychological functioning can influence health outcomes beneficially. This work investigated the role of coping in predicting survival in CF.

Methods: A longitudinal observational cohort study with a 20-year follow-up period was undertaken. At entry to the study, demographic and clinical variables were recorded, and ways of coping were assessed using the Cystic Fibrosis Coping Scale which measures four distinct ways of coping: optimism, hopefulness, distraction and avoidance. Survival outcome was measured as time in days from the date of recruitment to exit from the study, where exit was either death, loss to follow-up or the end of the follow-up period.

Results: Survival time was modelled using Cox's proportional hazards model. At baseline, 116 people with CF were recruited. By the census date, 54 people had died (14 men had died during 248,565 person-days of observation and 40 women had died during 358,372 person-days of observation). Optimism was the only way of coping that showed any beneficial effect on survival (RR=0.984, $p=0.040$) after adjustments for age, gender, ppFEV₁ and the three other coping variables measured at baseline.

Conclusion: This work suggests that optimistic coping serves as a prognostic measure of survival in CF beyond key clinical and demographic variables. Ways of coping are modifiable, providing a target for clinical intervention; to improve quality of life and clinical outcomes and potentially increase longevity.

1. Introduction

There are many factors which contribute differentially to survival among people with cystic fibrosis (CF). This includes the Cystic Fibrosis Transmembrane Regulator (CFTR) genotype, severity of lung disease, airway microbiology, number of exacerbations per year, nutritional status, diabetes, gender, birth cohort, age at diagnosis and new-born screening (1-10). Nonclinical variables are also independently predictive of disease progression and survival, including household income/socioeconomic status (SES), and the complex perceptions patients have around how SES affects their health care (11-13). Additionally, the 5-year mortality of patients who screen positive for depression can be twice as high as in those who screen negative (14). Domains of patient-reported health-related quality of life (HRQoL) have also been shown to predict survival beyond key clinical and demographic variables (15).

The interplay between clinical and psychological variables, such as optimism, are important as they influence health outcome. Worldwide, several large cohort studies of people free from disease have demonstrated that dispositional optimism (the extent to which people have positive expectations about their future) predicts longevity (16-18). Data from two US cohort studies; women from the Nurses' Health Study (19) and men from the Veterans Affairs Normative Aging Study (20), followed-up for 10 years and 30 years respectively, noted that individuals with the highest optimism levels, compared to those with the lowest optimism levels, had 1.7 (males) and 1.5 (females) greater odds of surviving to age 85. In both cohorts there was a tendency towards a dose-dependent association of higher baseline optimism levels with increased longevity. Importantly, these relationships remained after adjusting for health behaviours (21). Additionally, a recent meta-analysis of 229,391 participants across 15 studies with a mean follow-up of 13.8 years, indicated that optimistic coping was associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular events and all-cause mortality (22). When examining lung function, men with higher levels of optimism had higher predicted forced expiry volume in one second (ppFEV₁%) and the decline in ppFEV₁% over time was slower (23).

When researchers have evaluated whether optimism predicts mortality in people with existing health conditions, the results are less conclusive (24). This may be due to more complex methodology and the use of generic, rather than condition-specific measures of optimism. Despite the scarcity of studies, there is growing evidence that optimism influences clinical outcomes. Meta-analyses of the association between optimism and chronic conditions report accumulating evidence

that optimistic cardiac patients have better disease outcomes including survival, although the evidence in cancer patients is less clear (25-26). The focus has tended to be solely on optimism, rather than on a range of different mindsets/ways of coping, and in part, this is due to the scales available to measure such concepts. Nonetheless, dispositional optimism has been consistently found to be positively associated with approach/problem-focused coping strategies, while pessimists engaged in more emotion-focused coping (27).

Adults with CF are continually faced with both short-term and chronic difficulties of varying complexity and controllability (28-29). Recent emphasis has largely focused on negative psychological functioning such as depression and anxiety and how these states negatively impact quality of life and clinical outcomes (30). However, there is increasing recognition that positive psychological functioning, for example, optimism, acceptance, hope and resilience can also influence health. If a person has good psychological health, their ways of coping with CF (their thoughts, emotions, actions) are considered adaptive and the way they cope affects how they report their adherence to treatments and health-related quality of life (HRQoL) (31-32). Generally, coping with CF in an optimistic way was associated with better HRQoL. High levels of distraction coping (trying to forget CF) were linked to depression and associated with poorer HRQoL (32). The associations between ways of coping and survival have not been evaluated in CF. Such research is important as ineffective and harmful ways of coping are modifiable and provide a target for clinical intervention; to improve HRQoL, clinical outcomes and potentially increase longevity (33). This work evaluates the role of specific ways of coping in predicting survival in CF. An optimistic way of coping was hypothesised to be associated with increased survival in CF.

2. Methods

2.1 Design

A longitudinal observational cohort study with a 20-year follow-up period was undertaken.

2.2 Participants and procedure

Consecutive patients who attended an Adult CF Unit in the UK, between June and September 1999, were recruited. Baseline assessments occurred during an out-patient clinic visit whilst patients were clinically stable. Demographic (age, gender), coping and clinical variables were recorded (ppFEV₁,

BMI, IV access device fitted, B. *Cepacia* Complex [present, absent], Diabetes [present, absent], Nutritional status [no oral calorie supplements prescribed, oral calorie supplements or prescribed enteral tube feeding], and transplant status [not on waiting list, on waiting list or post-transplant]). The Local Research Ethics Committee approved the study and patients gave consent to continue accessing their clinical records for research purposes, and these have been accessed to identify their vital status on 31st December 2019.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Survival

Survival outcome was measured as time in days from the date of recruitment to exit from the study where exit was either (a) death, (b) loss to follow-up before 31st December 2019, or (c) the end of the follow-up period on 31st December 2019. Patients exit from the study was flagged as deceased or alive at exit time. Patients whose exit status was unknown on 31st December 2019 were flagged as alive on the date of their last known attendance at the CF Unit.

2.3.2 Coping

Coping was measured at recruitment (baseline) using the Cystic Fibrosis Coping Scale (31). This is a patient-derived scale that aligns with Patient Reported Outcome guidance (34). The scale conceptualises coping as a person's cognitive, emotional and behavioural effort to deal with CF disease and its treatment burden. The theoretical approach is consistent with that of Holohan and Moos (35) and Moos and Schafer (36) in which the method (*cognitive, emotional, behavioural*) and focus (*approach* – focusing attention on CF, *avoidance* – diverting attention away from CF) of coping is considered. The scale consists of 20 items measuring four distinct ways of coping with CF: optimism (7 items), hopefulness (6 items), distraction (5 items) and avoidance (2 items). *Optimistic coping* reflects a cognitive approach strategy. The person accepts their CF and is optimistic about the future. They are resilient, problem focused and determined not to let CF get them down. They reappraise the situation to find something positive in it and have confidence in the health professionals. *Hopefulness coping* reflects a behavioural approach strategy, with the hope that things will turn out for the better. *Distraction coping* reflects a behavioural avoidance strategy. People do things to forget CF and to make themselves feel better, such as treating themselves to something special, drinking alcohol, venting emotions without really facing the problem; it is an escape from the world of CF. *Avoidance coping* is a cognitive avoidance strategy, reflecting a denial and minimization of their CF disease. Patients were asked to rate, on a four-point scale, the extent

to which they employed each coping strategy (not at all, a little, a moderate amount, a great deal). Scores are calculated for each way of coping and then transformed into values of between 0 and 100. Higher scores represent greater levels of optimistic, hopefulness, distraction and avoidant coping. These coping data were used as baseline measures to explore the prognostic association between the specific ways of coping and survival. The subscale items are presented in Table 1. The internal reliability of these measures is excellent in this data set (Cronbach alpha coefficients; optimism (.90), distraction (.84), hopeful (.81) and avoidance (.79).

2.4 Statistical methods

Patient baseline characteristics were described using summary statistics and the t-test and Fisher's exact test were used to compare men and women patients. Pearson's correlations were obtained between the four measures of optimistic, hopefulness, distraction and avoidance coping together with age and ppFEV₁ to understand the extent to which these measures were related.

Survival time was modelled using Cox's proportional hazards model. The measures of optimistic, hopefulness, distraction and avoidance coping were included together in the analyses of survival time. Analyses used adjustment for age, gender and ppFEV₁ at baseline as appropriate. Adjustments for age and gender were needed, a priori, because survival time inevitably depends on the age of the patient (the start of the measured survival time) and, generally, men and women have different average life expectancies. PpFEV₁ was included as the main clinical variable likely to influence survival and was deemed to provide a proxy measure for disease severity. Thus, an adjusted analysis which includes all four coping measures allows for the effect of one coping measure to be independently assessed having adjusted for the other coping measures as well as for age, gender and disease severity.

3. Results

3.1 Study participants

At baseline, 44 men and 72 women were recruited. By the census date of 31st December 2019, 14 men had died during 248,565 person-days of observation and 40 women has died during 358,372 person-days of observation.

3.2 Baseline characteristics by gender

Patient baseline characteristics, separated by gender, are shown in Table 2. Men and women had similar mean ages. There were differences in access device fitted and in use of supplements and enteral tube feeding. Women had a significantly higher score for distraction coping ($p=0.011$). There was some evidence that women also had a higher mean score for hopefulness coping ($p=0.098$). Optimistic coping and avoidance coping were on average similar for men and women.

3.3 Correlations between clinical and coping measures at baseline

Correlations between age, ppFEV₁ and the four coping measures at baseline are shown in Table 3. There were associations between optimistic and hopefulness coping (0.342 for men and 0.470 for women), between hopefulness and distraction coping (0.345 for men and 0.439 for women) and for women only, between distraction and avoidance coping (0.249 for men and 0.415 for women) and between optimistic and distraction coping (0.015 for men and 0.345 for women). There was no association between age and coping measures. There was some negative association between ppFEV₁ and distraction which occurred because a few men had very high ppFEV₁ but low distraction. The presence of correlation between the coping measures justified the need for survival models to include all coping measures together. The correlation between age and ppFEV₁ at baseline was negligible indicating that these are unlikely to be confounded cross-sectionally.

3.4 Adjusted Cox models by gender and for pooled data

Adjusted Cox models for men and women separately are shown in Table 4. The relative risks (RR) of the four coping measures were very similar for men and women as was the RR for ppFEV₁. The effect of increasing age cross-sectionally at baseline was not significant for men or for women. Separate models for men and women showed no significant effect of the hopefulness, distraction and avoidance coping measures. However, there was an indication of an effect of optimistic coping. These separate models for men and women were likely to be underpowered since only 14 men and 40 women had died. Therefore, the survival data were pooled for men and women and modelled with common parameters for the coping measures, ppFEV₁ and age but a separate constant term for gender expressed as the relative risk (RR) of death for women relative to men (Table 4). In the model for the pooled data, the relative risk for women was estimated as 1.4 times that of men although the 95% confidence interval was wide. As would be expected ppFEV₁ was highly significant ($p<0.001$). Optimistic coping was the only coping measure that showed any beneficial effect on

survival (RR=0.984, p=0.040) after having made adjustment for age, gender, ppFEV₁ and the three other coping measures.

3.5 Predicted survival curves by gender

The effect of optimistic coping on survival was illustrated by plotting separate predicted survival curves for men and women with above average and below average optimism levels (score of 68). The predictions were obtained using mean values of 25.2 years for age, 58.5 for ppFEV₁, and scores of 40.9, 38.0 and 46.1 respectively for hopefulness, distraction and avoidance coping (Fig.1). Men with above average optimism had visibly better survival than those with below average optimism and the same was demonstrated for women. However, the difference in survival between those having above and below average optimism was greater for women than for men and women with below average optimism showed the poorest survival of all.

4. Discussion

Psychological processes and behaviour can have powerful impacts on physical health and ultimately survival. In multivariate models, optimistic coping was the only way of coping that emerged as a predictor of survival for people with CF. Those who reported above average levels of optimism when dealing with their progressive disease and high treatment burden had better survival. These data echo the emerging literature in other conditions (25-26). The male survival advantage seen in the data is well documented in CF (37) and although females employed more distraction coping than males, this way of coping had no bearing on survival. There was insufficient data to model the survival of men and women separately, but the data suggests that there is a gender difference, with women who report below average optimism having a larger differential survival with poorer outcome. This is potentially due to negative thoughts and behaviours characteristic of depressive symptoms which is associated with poorer survival in people with CF (14)

Explanations for the optimistic-survival association may emanate from a combination of behavioural and biological mechanisms. It is noteworthy that optimistic coping was the most used strategy for people with CF. Behavioural mechanisms are likely to be important given that optimists appear to lead healthier lifestyles. In both cross-sectional and longitudinal work, those employing optimistic coping had more appropriate health behaviours (38-39), and they were more likely to set goals and take proactive steps to protect their health (40-41). Indeed, in CF, optimistic coping has been

associated with better adherence to treatments (31). Optimists generate more supportive social networks, creating buffers to stressful life events (42) and report greater levels of wellbeing during times of difficulty or adversity (43). Optimism may directly impact, beneficially, on biological functions and protect individuals during times of heightened stress. Several studies support the notion that optimism can influence diurnal cortisol secretion. In healthy adults, greater optimism was related to a lower cortisol awakening responses (44), cortisol values throughout the day (45) and lower accumulated cortisol levels measured in hair (46) suggesting that optimistic coping allows a muted stress response. However, not all studies have found a relationship between optimism and cortisol levels (47). Additionally, optimism has been associated with lower levels of proinflammatory cytokine responses to a stressor (48), and greater trait positive affect (a similar concept to optimism), being associated with lower levels of interleukin-6 (IL-6), in healthy individuals (49-50), Similarly C-reactive protein (CRP), IL-6, fibrinogen and homocysteine were inversely associated with higher optimism scores in a large cross-sectional study of middle-aged healthy adults (52). This could be a chicken and egg scenario; low levels of optimism may be secondary to inflammation rather than low inflammatory markers being caused by an optimistic mindset. Monitoring inflammation and optimism over time would help to understand potential causal pathways.

An optimistic, positive, resilient, problem-focused way of coping has been shown to predict better psychological functioning. It provides positive buffering from life's challenges. While the disposition of optimism is stable over time (53) it can be changed. For example, it may decrease under difficult life circumstances, or it can be increased by psychological intervention (54). Systematic reviews and meta-analysis of the efficacy and effectiveness of CBT in randomized clinical trials, concluded that CBT was associated with better outcomes compared with control conditions among patients with depression and anxiety (55-56), with increased optimistic coping being one of the more effective buffers against the probability of experiencing depression. Indeed, the meta-analytic results of 29 studies show that it is possible to increase optimism through psychological interventions (57). The possibility of enhancing optimism to mitigate negative health outcomes using CBT makes these interventions potentially suitable for use with people with CF. Individual psychologists are likely to use such strategies with people with CF but evidenced outcomes from such work is lacking. The 'promoting resilience in stress management' (PRISM) intervention for adolescents and young adults (58) has shown feasibility and acceptability in CF (59) and the results of trials are awaited. Whether

an intervention-created optimistic way of coping has the longevity to mimic natural dispositional optimism and produce longer-term health outcomes is unknown.

The recent introduction of highly effective CFTR modulators is likely to dramatically change the clinical course of CF in those fortunate enough to receive them and are predicted to extend survival. These therapies hold great promise for improving clinical outcomes, yet their effects on mental health, coping and resilience remain poorly understood. How health perceptions, expectations, ways of coping, adherence to treatment and hopes and dreams will be impacted is unknown. There are case reports of worsening depression and anxiety occurring in some patients when starting these medicines (60). The results of longitudinal real-world studies evaluating modulator therapies and patient-reported outcomes are awaited.

As with most studies evaluating survival outcomes, ways of coping were only measured at baseline, although optimism has been shown to be a long-term stable concept (53). Measures of optimism are typically generic, and there is a lack of standardization in measures employed in studies evaluating the association between optimism and disease outcomes, from single item scales to the extensively used Life Orientation Test, which undoubtedly adds to difficulties with data interpretation and comparison. This work has employed a disease-specific measure that was generated by people with CF themselves and should therefore be more appropriate (31). This is a single centre study with a small sample, but the focused single centre approach enabled the collection of 20 years of follow-up data that was sufficient to detect an effect. This work provides evidence that coping in an optimistic way serves as a prognostic measure of survival in CF beyond key clinical and demographic variables.

Declaration of Competing Interest

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRedit author statement

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Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the valuable input of people with CF who have given their time to engage in this research.

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Table 1. Subscales of the Cystic Fibrosis Coping Questionnaire

<p>Optimistic coping items <i>Reflects an optimistic, accepting, determined, and positive way of coping with CF.</i></p> <p>I put it into perspective - it could be worse I feel optimistic I try to look at it differently - to see the positive or funny side I try to do something positive I do what I can under the circumstances I accept it I have confidence in the doctors and treatment</p>	<p>Distraction coping items <i>Reflects an attempt to try and forget CF</i></p> <p>I treat myself to something special I do something to take my mind off it I make sacrifices in the short-term because I know it will do me good I cry, eat, drink, or take drugs I feel helpless, there is nothing I can do</p>
<p>Hopefulness coping items <i>Reflects a hope that everything will turn out for the better.</i></p> <p>I'm just hoping it will be alright I talk to my friends and family I talk to a professional who knows about CF I'm looking forward to a time in the future when it will be better I pray I talk to other with CF</p>	<p>Avoidance coping items <i>Reflects and avoidant and passive way of coping with CF.</i></p> <p>I avoid it whenever possible I try to put it out of my mind</p>

Table 2 Baseline demographic, coping and clinical measures at coping assessment by gender.

	Men N=44			Women N=72			Test ¹
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	p-value
Demographic:							
Age (years)	25.9	6.7	17 to 45	24.7	6.7	16 to 50	0.339
Coping:							
Optimistic	68.4	18.8	28 to 100	67.7	20.7	10 to 100	0.850
Hopefulness	32.1	17.0	5 to 72	43.1	19.2	10 to 100	0.098
Distraction	32.6	16.1	0 to 60	41.3	18.2	0 to 80	0.011
Avoidance	44.7	28.7	0 to 100	47.0	29.0	0 to 100	0.671
Clinical:							
ppFEV ₁	66.9	26.0	23 to 133	53.4	22.0	14 to 123	0.003
BMI	21.7	2.8	17.2 to 30.2	21.2	3.2	15.7 to 30.0	0.337
	%	n		%	n		p-value
IV access device	27.3	12		48.6	35		0.032
<i>B cepacia</i> complex	4.5	2		6.9	5		0.708
CF-related diabetes	15.9	7		26.4	19		0.252
Oral nutritional supp	52.3	23		29.2	21		0.041 ²
Enteral tube feeds	13.6	6		25.0	18		0.041 ²
Post-transplant	6.8	3		1.1	8		0.459

¹ Testing for gender difference, ²Same test.

Table 3 Pearson's correlation between age and ppFEV₁ at coping assessment and coping measures by gender.

	Men N=44		Women N=72	
	Correlation coefficient	p-value	Correlation coefficient	p-value
Age and ppFEV ₁	-0.040	0.798	0.034	0.776
Age and Optimistic	-0.001	0.993	0.076	0.528
Age and Hopefulness	-0.262	0.086	0.204	0.086
Age and Distraction	-0.259	0.090	-0.045	0.708
AGE and Avoidance	0.185	0.228	0.086	0.472
ppFEV ₁ and Optimistic	0.137	0.375	0.071	0.552
ppFEV ₁ and Hopefulness	-0.005	0.973	-0.060	0.619
ppFEV ₁ and Distraction	-0.322	0.033	-0.152	0.203
ppFEV ₁ and Avoidance	-0.248	0.104	0.118	0.325
Optimistic and Hopefulness	0.342	0.024	0.470	<0.001
Optimistic and Distraction	0.015	0.922	0.354	0.002
Optimistic and Avoidance	-0.066	0.670	0.159	0.181
Hopefulness and Distraction	0.345	0.022	0.439	<0.001
Hopefulness and Avoidance	0.099	0.524	0.083	0.488
Distraction and Avoidance	0.249	0.104	0.415	<0.001

Table 4 Models for survival time (days) from coping assessment to exit, adjusted for age in years and ppFEV₁ at coping assessment and gender where applicable. Relative risks (RR) estimated by Cox regression.

	Men N=44			Women N=72			Men and women n=116		
	RR	95% CI	p-value	RR	95% CI	p-value	RR	95% CI	p-value
Demographic characteristic:									
Men							1.000	Reference	
Women							1.407	0.735 to 2.693	0.302
Age (years)	0.925	0.829 to 1.031	0.158	1.014	0.964 to 1.066	0.594	0.991	0.949 to 1.034	0.670
Clinical condition:									
ppFEV ₁	0.961	0.931 to 0.992	0.015	0.964	0.947 to 0.981	<0.001	0.965	0.951 to 0.979	<0.001
Coping measure:									
Optimistic	0.985	0.952 to 1.019	0.374	0.984	0.966 to 1.002	0.080	0.984	0.969 to 0.999	0.040
Hopefulness	1.003	0.962 to 1.046	0.870	1.005	0.986 to 1.024	0.618	1.008	0.992 to 1.025	0.337
Distraction	0.990	0.950 to 1.032	0.638	0.999	0.974 to 1.024	0.923	0.998	0.977 to 1.018	0.828
Avoidance	1.005	0.986 to 1.023	0.636	1.005	0.992 to 1.018	0.444	1.004	0.994 to 1.014	0.458

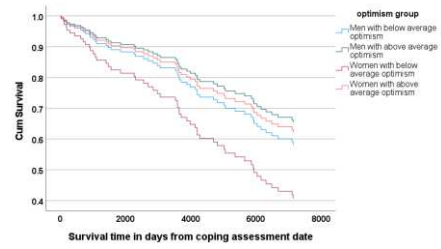


Figure 1. Predicted survival curves for men and women with above and below average optimism levels (average score = 68)