# Stress and Wellbeing in Autistic Adults: Exploring the Moderating

## Role of Coping

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#### Project aim

To examine the moderating role of coping strategies in the relationship between stress and wellbeing.

## Background

#### Stress, coping and wellbeing

- Research highlight the associations between high stress and poor wellbeing in the wider stress literature.
- Despite emerging evidence suggesting increased stress and burnout in autistic adults, how stress is associated with wellbeing in these adults is unknown.
- Coping strategies can promote wellbeing directly, or indirectly through moderating the stresswellbeing relationship. Adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies may buffer or exacerbate the effects of stress on wellbeing, respectively.
- Establishing the role of coping strategies in mitigating the effects of stress on wellbeing in autistic adults would help inform support options for these adults, from a stress perspective.

## Method

Participants were 86 autistic adults aged 19-74 years (66% female;  $M_{\rm age}$  = 40.76,  $SD_{\rm age}$  = 13.47) recruited through an online, cross-sectional study.

In addition to age and gender (male/female) the following variables were measured:

- Autism traits (AQ-Short)
- Stress (composite score using Perceived Stress Scale and Daily Stress Inventory scores)
- Engagement and Disengagement coping (Brief COPE
- Wellbeing (Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale)

Associations between stress and wellbeing were examined using correlations.

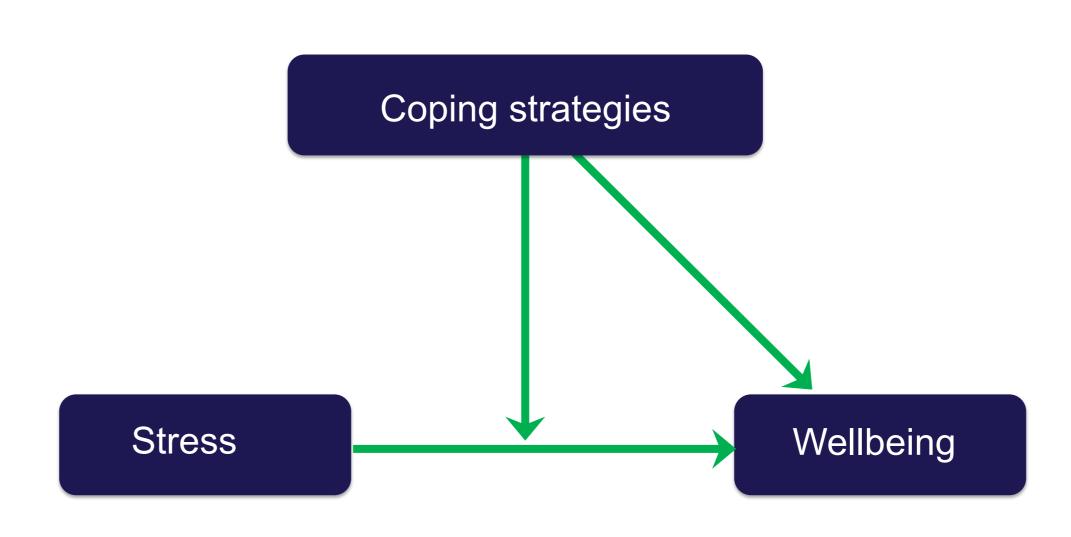
Two moderation models were used to examine the moderating role of (1) engagement coping, and (2) disengagement coping in the relationship between stress and wellbeing.

## Results

- Stress was negatively associated with wellbeing (*p* < .01).
- Engagement coping and disengagement coping had significant direct effects on wellbeing (*b*: 0.57, *p* < .01 and *b*: -0.76, *p* < .01).

- Only engagement coping played a moderating (i.e., buffering) role in the stress-wellbeing relationship (*b*: 0.21, *p* < 0.05).
- See Figures 1 and 2.

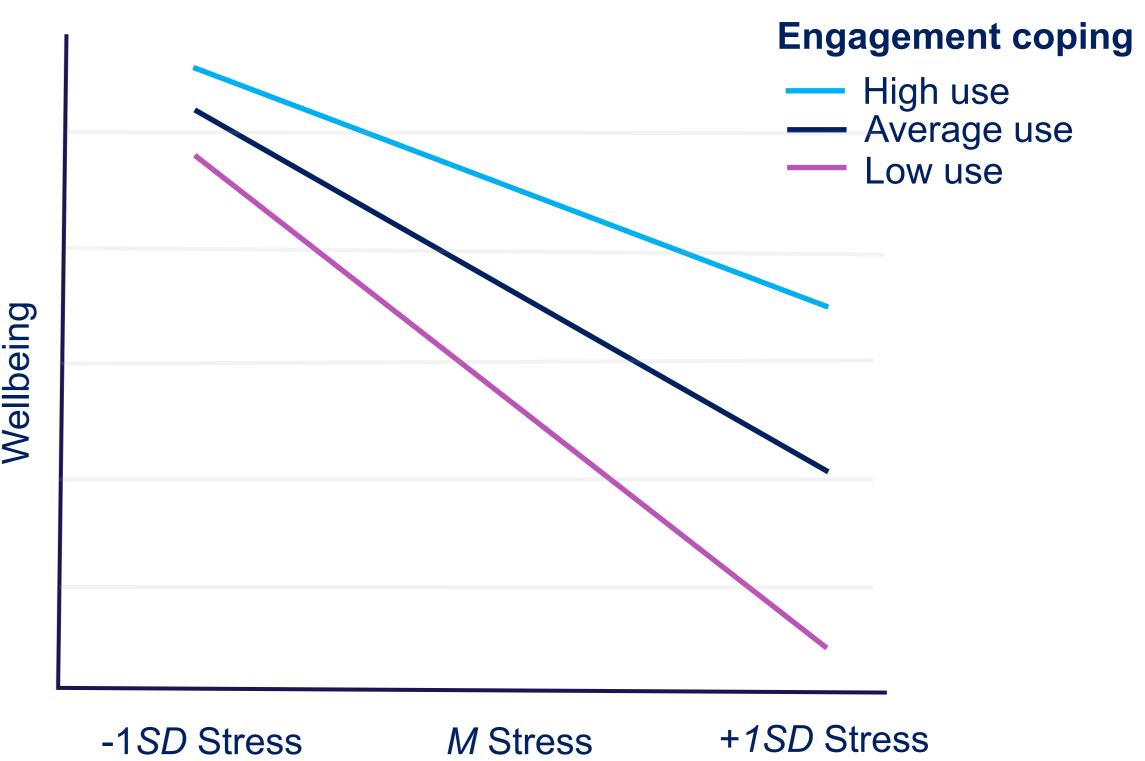
Figure 1. Conceptual model of stress on wellbeing by coping



## Conclusion

- Consistent with the wider literature, our findings show that stress is inversely associated with wellbeing in our sample of autistic adults.
- Engagement coping played both a promotive (direct) and buffering (indirect) role in the stresswellbeing relationship.
- Disengagement coping played a risk (direct) role in the stress-wellbeing relationship.

Figure 2. Interaction of engagement coping on stress-wellbeing relationship



- We highlight the importance of developing engagement coping strategies in autistic adults, especially in contexts of high stress.
- Building on coping resources (e.g., resilience) may help foster the use of engagement coping strategies, with the broader aim of promoting mental wellbeing in the autistic adult population.

### Main findings

Engagement coping strategies moderated the stress-wellbeing relationship, whereas disengagement coping strategies did not.

#### Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and participation of all autistic participants involved in this study. All authors also acknowledge the financial support of the Autism CRC, established and supported under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centres Program. At the time this research was conducted, Melanie Muniandy was supported by an Autism CRC PhD scholarship while the position held by Lauren Lawson was funded by the Autism CRC.

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