

Additional Case-Example for Balancing Active and Protective Coping Behaviour to Stabilize Activity

When contrasting and controlling or regulating Active and Protective Coping behaviors, certain needs or experiences may seem contradictory and difficult to reconcile, appearing to exclude one another like opposing poles. This reflects the inner conflict many individuals face being torn between which needs to prioritize, possibly explaining the observed “all-or-nothing” behavior. According to our model, during any phase of dysfunctional coping, the focus tends to be heavily on one pole of needs, while the other is neglected. For example, a patient might focus on reducing activities to avoid health setbacks, thereby neglecting social needs. The metaphors of a pendulum vs. a scale can be helpful here, representing the back-and-forth movement vs. balancing between perceived opposing needs. The therapeutic challenge, then, is enabling the patient to acknowledge and integrate both sides within their potential, increasing flexibility towards adaptive behavior. Based on a case example (note that this example refers to a different patient to the main article), we will illustrate the conflict between seemingly opposing needs and the therapeutic approach to help the patient find a balanced solution.

Consider a patient who has been applying pacing strategies to manage her fatigue symptoms for the past couple of months. She had reduced her sports and social activities, which typically were in her daily schedule. She drank no alcohol and paid attention to receiving enough sleep. After several weeks, she reported feeling better and a slight increase in energy levels, also reflected by reduced sick leave at work. However, as her birthday approaches, she faces an internal conflict: wanting to celebrate fully with friends but fearing overexertion and another setback. She is deeply caught in this conflict and feels pressured to make an all-or-nothing decision as if she must choose one side (social interactions, having fun) over the other (maintaining her energy levels). Applying SORCK and ACT principles,

her inner distance enabled her to observe her thoughts, emotions, and underlying needs without judgment.

The described inner conflict arises from two opposing motives:

- Active Coping: “I deserve to treat myself this week. I want to celebrate my birthday with friends and enjoy as much as possible this week.” This reflects her need for attachment and pleasure, which she feels entitled to fulfill, especially during her birthday week.
- Protective Coping: “I need to hold back—it would be better for my health [and ability to work] to withdraw. I can’t afford another crash.” This reflects her need for control over her health and needs for self-esteem protection and independence through performance at work, focusing on preventing another health setback.

She was able to identify overwhelming aspects of her traditional celebration, such as hosting many guests and dealing with noise. These insights allowed her to consider alternatives to celebrate that met her need for attachment and pleasure without compromising her health. She opted for a quiet evening with a close friend. Prior to the visit, she discussed her limitations with her friend, who supported her by preparing the meal in advance. This reduced the demands on the patient, aligning with the pacing principles by delegating tasks and ensuring that the evening would not exceed her threshold of endurable load. By choosing to return home at 10:00 p.m., she ensured adequate rest and woke up the next day without any adverse symptoms. She even felt well enough to engage in a brief, joyful dance with her daughter, indicating that her balanced approach considering differential needs positively impacted both her physical health and emotional well-being.