

Grow Your Happiness, Health, and WellBeing



Healthy Coping Mechanisms

Discover healthy ways of coping with stress.

What Is a Coping Mechanism?

Coping mechanisms are cognitive and behavioural approaches that we use to manage internal and external stressors (Algorani & Gupta, 2021).

Stressors that lead to coping

The two primary types of stressors are internal and external.

- Internal stressors are thoughts and emotions that come from within us that can induce a stress response (Alsentali & Anshel, 2015). Some examples of internal stressors are:
 - Fears, such as the fear of failure or rejection
 - Insecurities
 - Negative self-talk (e.g. "I'm not good enough")
 - Creating unrealistic expectations
 - Perfectionism
- External stressors provoke a stress response from outside factors and can sometimes include situations over which we have no control (Alsentali & Anshel, 2015). Some examples of external stressors are:
 - Losing a loved one
 - Being laid off from your job
 - An upcoming exam or presentation
 - Learning you have an illness
 - A car accident

- Algorani, E. B., & Gupta, V. (2021). Coping mechanisms. In StatPearls [Internet]. StatPearls Publishing.
- Alsentali, A. M., & Anshel, M. H. (2015). Relationship between Internal and External Acute Stressors and Coping Style. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 38(4).

Coping Mechanisms

However resilient we are, we may never be able to fully free ourselves from stressors; however, we can learn to manage stress in healthy ways. Let's take a look at some coping mechanisms that it may be helpful to incorporate into your own coping toolkit.

- **Laugh it out.** A primary goal of coping is to find healthy ways to de-stress (Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). Humour is an excellent way to process stress. Finding time to laugh with loved ones, watch something funny, or make jokes can help us cultivate a lighter mood. This alteration in mood may help us to look at our stressors from a more positive perspective.
- **Make a schedule.** Are you feeling overwhelmed by all of your responsibilities? You're far from being alone. Whether you are trying to balance parenthood, school, work, social life, or even something exciting such as a wedding or holiday, making a schedule to keep track of all that needs to be done can be a wonderful way to relieve stress.
- **Practise self-care.** Taking care of ourselves will mean something different for each of us. Although our lives may seldom allow time for us to practise self-care, it is beneficial for us to make the time to do so, even if just for a few minutes every day. Some examples of self-care might include painting or writing in a journal; reading a book or a newspaper; or taking care of our bodies with a relaxing bath or nightly skincare routine.
- **Meditation or breathing exercises.** Whether you're experiencing fear or worrying about an upcoming event, there are strategies that may help you cope with anxious thoughts (Savitsky et al., 2020). Research suggests that one way to help ground yourself when feeling anxious is to centre your focus on your breathing or try a meditation practice.

- **Try cognitive reframing.** Let's say you receive the unfortunate news that you are being made redundant from your job. You have a family to provide for and bills to pay, and this sudden change is eliciting an anxious stress response. How will you make ends meet without an income? Perhaps you think to yourself, "This is the worst thing that could happen." This is an example of catastrophic thinking. It's incredibly easy for our minds to think of the worst-case scenario when a stressful situation like this occurs. The practice of cognitive reframing (also called reappraisal), encourages you to challenge your thoughts and help restructure a negative thought into a more positive and realistic one. Instead, you may try telling yourself, "This situation feels very difficult right now, but I know I will get through it." Reframing negative thoughts can help us to change our behaviour, often resulting in a better outcome.
- **Try Aromatherapy.** Research has shown that the same system that helps us regulate smell can also play a role in regulating emotions. One way to practise aromatherapy is to smell essential oils. For anxiety specifically, lavender oil is a popular scent for relieving anxious thoughts and reducing overall stress.
- **Keep a routine.** Have you ever felt like lying in bed all day to deal with the sadness you're experiencing? While indulging in junk food and binge-watching is a fun activity from time to time, too much of it can indicate an unhealthy and avoidant coping style. Instead, you may find it helpful, in the long run, to stick to a daily routine. Whether it includes a weekly cleaning schedule, a daily self-care routine, or even just preparing your meals, having a regular routine can help balance your moods.

- Scheier, M. F., Weintraub, J. K., & Carver, C. S. (1986). Coping with stress: divergent strategies of optimists and pessimists. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 51(6), 1257.
- Savitsky, B., Findling, Y., Erel, A., & Hendel, T. (2020). Anxiety and coping strategies among nursing students during the covid-19 pandemic. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 46, 102809.

- **Stay physically active.** Research shows that moving our bodies for as little as 15 minutes a day can support our mental wellbeing. Regular physical activity has been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance overall well-being. Engaging in activities like jogging, swimming, or yoga can help release endorphins, which are natural mood boosters.
- **Organise your environment.** When we are feeling overwhelmed with stress, anxiety, or depression, clutter tends to build up in our environment. When struggling with depression, we need home to be a place of refuge and solace. If our homes feel messy and disorganised, this may exacerbate depression, lack of focus, and fatigue. If you start to notice clutter accumulating anywhere in your home, try finding time to organise your space. Such a practice may allow you to feel more in control of your space and provide a sense of accomplishment, which could help with coping.
- **Seek out social support.** Asking for support from loved ones is a key coping mechanism to process grief and bereavement. Psychologists advise that having a social network during tough times helps us feel more capable of processing grief, improves our self-esteem, and can reduce feelings of loneliness and persistent sadness.
- **Remember to eat well.** A balanced diet is especially beneficial for a healthy immune system and being able to cope with major life stressors. When we experience grief, it may be hard to hold ourselves accountable for eating and being active, so it may be helpful to rely on your social network and request them to support you in maintaining a healthy diet.
- **Try professional help or a support group.** If you are going through a difficult time, you may find it advantageous to ask your support system or primary care provider for additional resources such as a therapist or support group to support you during this difficult time.

