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**A healthier set of coping strategies for uncomfortable, unwanted and or painful emotions.**

Unfortunately, life is very rarely sunshine and rainbows.

Very often we are met with feelings of discomfort, anxiousness, stress, pain and other negative / undesirable emotions.

Whether it be being stood up on a date, being criticised unfairly at work or having a difficult time at home, difficult times in life present themselves every day and are met with a wave of negative emotion (typically leading to internalized redirection carving away at our views of self, our worth and or our value in this world).

We use coping skills to help us manage these emotions.

Coping skills help you tolerate, minimize, and deal with painful / unwanted / undesirable situations in life. Managing your negative emotion well can help you feel better physically and psychologically and it can impact your ability to perform your best and move forward.

Not all coping skills are created equal however. Sometimes, it’s tempting to engage in strategies that will give quick relief but might create bigger problems for you down the road.

One example of this would be binge / over eating for example. Eating ignites the reward system in our brain and this “high” can mask the negative emotion.

Note that I used the word mask for this relief is temporary. It distracts us from the issue and may not have provided any resolution to the problem. Additionally, binge / over eating is synonymous with experiencing further feelings of guilt, shame and self-loathing (related to engaging in the behaviour) which would only further compact on your already low mood.

So, whilst it is a coping skill, it is not one that ultimately serves you in your best interests.

Therefore, it’s important to establish healthy coping skills that will help you reduce your emotional distress or rid yourself of the stressful situations you face.

**Problem-Based vs. Emotion-Based**

When you’re feeling distressed, ask yourself, “Do I need to change my situation or do I need to find a way to better cope with the situation?” Then, you can decide which type of coping strategy will help you best proceed.

*There are two main types of coping skills; problem-based and emotion-based coping skills*

***Problem-based skills***

Problem-based coping is helpful when you need to change your situation, perhaps by removing a stressful thing from your life. For example, if you’re in an unhealthy relationship, your anxiety and sadness might be best resolved by ending the relationship (as opposed to soothing your emotions).

***Emotion-based skills***

Emotion-based coping is helpful when you need to take care of your feelings when you either don’t want to change your situation or when circumstances are out of your control. For example, if you are lonely from a breakup, it’d be important to take care of your feelings in a healthy way (since you can’t change the circumstance).

Another example of this would be when someone is critical towards you; we can’t control them but we can control ourselves. Our career is a complex environment to manage as we may not necessarily be receiving fair critique. Many of us our extremely dedicated to our career and employer and work very hard. That may not always be reflected in the feedback we receive. It’s important to remember that there are a multitude of reasons why feedback received is both unexpected and critical (the personal life of the individual giving the feedback may be challenging, they may lack professionalism, they may have some personal issue with you, they may need a reason not to promote or praise you etc.).

In examples like these we need to practice our emotion-based skills but also not make any rash decisions related to our career. Trust in the work that you are doing and speak to others in a similar situation or who have experienced similar situations. If you feel that the relationship you are having with the individual giving the feedback is becoming abusive or unfair then raise that with your HR department. No one deserves to hate where they go to work because of another individual. That wouldn’t stand for any other environment, so why would it stand for your career / place of work?

**A situational example**

*Giving a Presentation*

You’ve been invited to give a presentation in front of a large group. You were so flattered and surprised by the invitation that you agreed to do it. But as the event approaches, your anxiety skyrockets because you hate public speaking.

* Problem-focused coping: You decide to hire a public speaking coach to help you learn how to write a good speech and how to deliver it confidently. You practice giving your speech in front of a few friends and family members so you will feel better prepared to step on stage. You revise your speech so you know it back to front and can recite it when needed (and ensure that there are no components to it that you don’t fully understand if questioned on).
* Emotion-focused coping: You tell yourself that you can do this. You practice relaxation exercises whenever you start to panic. And you remind yourself that even if you’re nervous, no one else is even likely to notice.

**Developing a toolbox of healthier coping skills**

***Healthier emotional-coping skills***

Whether you’re feeling lonely, nervous, sad, or angry, emotion-focused coping skills can help you deal with your feelings in a healthy way.

Healthy coping strategies may soothe you, make you feel less alone, temporarily distract you, or help you tolerate your distress.

There are instances where your coping skills may have you facing your negative emotions head on and process them (such as the loss of a loved one) and there will be instances whereby coping skills will be used to help changed your mood state (a difficult day in work made better by spending time with friends or family).

Use the following table to identify a number of emotion-focused coping skills

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Coping skill | Select your favourites | Notes (why include it etc.) |
| Exercise |[ ]   |
| Journalling |[ ]   |
| Speaking to a friend / family member |[ ]   |
| Listening to music |[ ]   |
| Meditating |[ ]   |
| Going for a walk |[ ]   |
| Playing with a pet |[ ]   |
| Watching a movie / tv show |[ ]   |
| Create a 5-point gratitude list |[ ]   |
| Engage in a hobby |[ ]   |
| Aromatherapy |[ ]   |
| Spend time outside |[ ]   |
| Use a stress ball |[ ]   |
| *Add your own* |[ ]   |

***Healthier problem focused coping skills***

Problems requiring solutions aren’t the same as experiences in our lives which are not necessarily within our control. There is usually something we “can” do about a problem.

There are many ways you might decide to tackle a problem head-on and eliminate the source of your stress. In some cases, that may mean creating a plan that helps you know what action you’re going to take or making a change to your behaviour (s).

In other situations, problem-focused coping may involve more drastic, possibly even life changing measures (like changing career).

Use the following table to identify a number of problem-focused solution/coping skills

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Coping skill | Select your favourites | Notes (why include it etc.) |
| Create a to-do list |[ ]   |
| Ask for support from a friend, professional or colleague. |[ ]   |
| Engage in problem-solving (identify the issue and a range of solutions / outcomes) |[ ]   |
| Focus on establishing healthy boundaries (with work, friend, partner etc.) |[ ]   |
| Time management (planning your time / making a priority hierarchy) |[ ]   |
| Know when to “switch off” |[ ]   |
| Consider walking away |[ ]   |
| *Add your own* |[ ]   |

**Be proactive**

Coping skills are usually viewed as reactionary – when we experience negative emotions we engage in a coping skill.

Proactive coping strategies can be a highly effective means of managing future experiences which can induce negative emotion.

One example would be an end of year work review; consider that it could go positively, negatively or relatively neutral. Anticipate these events and consider how you would feel if they were to occur. Ensure that you have a plan in place for managing these emotions irrespective of what they could be.

You may also want to pre-empt emotions / emotional states that have previously caused you to use unhealthy coping strategies. For instance, if you binge / overeat when you’re feeling lonely then consider when you’re most likely to feel lonely and decide on several alternative emotional-focused coping skills to improve / “ride out” that feeling. Additionally, you may want to consider using your problem-focused solution / coping skills to prevent the situations which lead to you feeling lonely in the future.

**Develop your own toolbox**

Finding out what works best for you is incredibly important.

Not everyone’s coping skills will be the same so you will want to develop your own “toolbox” of skills / strategies that can help you overcome / manage negative emotions.

You don’t want to engage in a perceived healthier coping skill only to realize it’s compacted on the problem. For instance, not everyone enjoys meditating but it is quite popular. If you feel it is something you “should” do and it isn’t actually something you enjoy or find beneficial then it may lead to further feelings of frustration and self-criticism.

It's important to develop your own toolkit of coping skills that you’ll find useful. You may need to experiment with a variety of coping strategies to help you discover which ones work best for you.

You may find certain skills work best for certain situations and not so much for others. There will be a degree of trial and error to the whole process but it’s one worth engaging in.

Always be on the lookout, as well as be open to potentially other new coping skills too; you never know when you’ll discover a skill / strategy that has a significant improvement on your quality of life.

**Remember, this is a twostep process**

1. **Identify what you’re experiencing and what form of coping skill is required**
2. **Use your list, choose the skill you wish to trial / that you feel fits best and act on it.**

**Note that you may have to try a few healthier coping skills / multiple at the same time (e.g., going for a walk whilst listening to music) before the negative emotional state subsides.**