



ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION

Information Brief

Promoting Coping Strategies in Youth

WHAT ARE COPING STRATEGIES AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

All people experience stress in their lives. Stress affects people of all ages, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, and it can have a major impact on both mental and physical health. Life stressors often are described as negative events (e.g., the death of a loved one, divorce) but also can be positive events (e.g., getting a new job, moving to a new city). Coping strategies are the behaviors, thoughts and emotions that individuals use to adjust to the changes that occur in their lives. Some coping strategies are effective, whereas others are ineffective or even harmful, and they can have both short-term and long-term effects. In order to maintain mental and physical health, youth must employ good coping strategies when dealing with stress.

Effectively dealing with stress is an important component of wellness. Without this skill, chronic stress has the potential to contribute to physical health problems. For example, increased stress levels have been associated with higher cardiovascular risk.¹ One recent cross-sectional study found that higher stress levels resulted in decreased sleep duration for adolescents, and a longitudinal study found that chronic stress had lingering negative effects on sleep.²



Figure 1. Google images

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT STRESS AND COPING STRATEGIES?

People who respond better to everyday stress are less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety and have more positive outcomes in stressful situations.³ Learning positive coping strategies also can reduce the effects of existing health problems. In 2011, a group of psychologists found that for a group of participants with chronic migraines, simply learning better stress-management skills resulted in improvements in their headache pain.⁴ Another research finding shows that once you are sick, stress also can make it harder to recover. In this study, cardiac patients who faced chronic distress were at a higher risk of bad cardiological outcomes.⁵ Stress has similar effects on the health of adolescents. A very recent study on adolescents found that those with existing medical conditions were more likely to have negative health outcomes due to higher levels of stress if they had low sleep satisfaction. Those with better sleep satisfaction in response to stress had better health outcomes.⁶ Knowing how to effectively cope with stress can be beneficial to your health. These research findings show why it is important to have good coping skills in response to life stressors.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COPING STRATEGIES

Psychological research on coping strategies also asserts that people respond to stressors using a variety of strategies that tend to fall into broad categories or coping styles.⁷ These coping styles can be characterized by the ways in which an individual attempts to counteract the negative effects of stress. These coping styles can be instrumental, emotional, active or avoidant to name a few.^{7, 8} Instrumental, or problem-solving, coping styles focus on ways to tackle the issue in order to reduce the stress around a given situation. Emotion-focused coping styles focus on gathering tools to soothe a person's emotional well-being during a stressful event. Active coping strategies are characterized by awareness of the stressor and attempts at reducing the negative outcomes, while avoidant coping involves ignoring the cause of the stressor, which often results in harmful activities or denial.

EXAMPLES OF COPING STRATEGIES/STYLES

Humor (Emotion-focused)

- Recognizing the humorous aspects of the problem/stressor
- Example: Joke about your situation

Seeking Support (Emotion-focused)

- Asking for help or emotional support
- Examples: Consult a doctor, join a support group

Problem-Solving (Instrumental/Active)

- Locating the source of the problem and determining solutions
- Examples: Delegate responsibility, alleviate the stressor

Relaxation (Emotion-focused)

- Engaging in relaxing activities or practicing calming techniques
- Examples: Meditate/pray, Get a good night's rest, listen to music

Physical Recreation (Emotion-focused)

- Engaging in regular exercise
- Examples: Running, team sports, yoga, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation

Adjusting Expectations (Active/Emotion-focused)

- Anticipating various outcomes in order to better prepare for future stressors that may come from life changes/events
- Example: Alter your priorities

Denial (Emotion-focused)

- Avoiding the issue, usually with distractions
- Examples: Substance abuse, overworking, sleeping more than usual

HOW CAN ADULTS SUPPORT EFFECTIVE COPING SKILLS FOR ADOLESCENTS?

- **Model effective coping strategies:** Adolescents learn a lot of skills through modeling the behavior of the adults in their lives. This allows adolescents to see real-life representations of how to effectively cope with stress.
- **Support their involvement in sports or other pro-social activities:** Involvement in sports or other extracurricular activities can reduce stress. Encourage and support your child's participation in these kinds of activities.
- **Encourage help-seeking behaviors:** Teach adolescents that they should seek help whenever they feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to help themselves. You should be ready to provide valuable resources when adolescents do come to you seeking help.
- **Help them look at the situation from a more helpful perspective:** Looking at the situation from a more positive perspective

can be very useful in situations where the stressor cannot be changed or altered.

- **Acknowledge and validate their feelings:** Some adolescents may feel shy about sharing their feelings or admitting that they need help. Make the adolescent feel that their feelings are valid once they do open up.
- **Remind your child of a time they coped with something similar in the past:** Drawing on past coping successes gives adolescents confidence that can help them better deal with their current stressors.
- **Help to identify current coping strategies and problem-solve their effectiveness:** This can help adolescents understand what strategies they naturally gravitate toward and problem-solving their effectiveness together is more effective than simply telling adolescents whether their strategies are effective or not.
- **Brainstorm personalized coping strategy ideas:** Positive coping strategies will be more effective when they are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the adolescent.
- **Develop a plan for coping:** With personalized coping strategies in mind, you and the adolescent can develop a series of steps for coping. The first step should be easily attainable, and the adolescent should proceed at a pace that is comfortable for him or her.
- **Promote and acknowledge attempts at using coping strategies:** As adolescents use their plans for coping, praise their attempts, even if they aren't always successful. And if that's the case, reflect and give them feedback for improvement.

WHEN THESE STRATEGIES ARE NOT ENOUGH

The following organizations are resources for more helpful information to refer to if stress becomes overwhelming:

The American Institute of Stress

American Institute of Stress is a nonprofit organization founded in 1978 that provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, innovative knowledge and improves human health and leadership on stress-related topics.

Phone: (682) 239-6823

<http://www.stress.org/>

Active Minds

Active Minds is a nonprofit organization that works to increase students' awareness of mental health issues, provide information and resources, and serve as the liaison between students and the mental health community.

Phone: (202) 332-9595

<http://www.activeminds.org/>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

ADAA is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depressive, obsessive-compulsive, and trauma-related disorders through education, practice, and research.

Phone: (240) 485-1001

<http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety>

National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH)

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is the lead federal agency for research on mental disorders. NIMH is one of the 27 Institutes and Centers that make up the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the nation's medical research agency. NIH is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Phone: (866) 615-6464

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

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