



BUL 1053

Practical Coping Skills for Managing Stress

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Introduction

STRESS IS INEVITABLE—everyone experiences it at some point in time. According to the World Health Organization, stress is anything that creates a physiological, emotional, or psychological strain on our bodies. Additionally, researchers define stress as a physical or mental reaction to anything that may threaten *homeostasis* (the stable state of a body) (Schneiderman et al. 2005).

The National Alliance on Mental Illness notes that stress can worsen or lead to mental health issues, including mental health disorders and challenges. In Idaho, approximately 30% of adults reported in 2023 that they feel anxious or depressed when reflecting on the past two weeks of their life (Drake and Panchal 2023). There are many reasons for this, some of which involve going through a pandemic, balancing work and family, enduring a financial crisis, being concerned about world conflict, and more. With all the stress this has caused and likely will continue to cause, stress management is indeed a valuable skill for everyone to have.

Learning How to Cope

One of the main techniques of managing and reducing stress involves coping. The National Institutes of Health defines coping as “the thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations” (Algorani and Gupta 2023). There are four basic types of coping skills (Table 1), but taken to excess they can lead to unhealthy consequences. For instance, ingesting substances such as food, drugs, or alcohol to “numb” stress; utilizing technology inappropriately; or sleeping excessively may help in the short run but, over time, each will likely create more problems (and more stress). A more successful way to manage everyday stress using these four strategies is to

adopt a more systematic, three-step approach: step 1, **understand** what healthy coping is; step 2, **decide** which coping skill to use (Table 1); and step 3, **transform** the information learned about your chosen coping strategy into healthy action.

Four Coping Strategies

Physical Actions

Physical actions include making choices that create a positive reaction within the body. These may include opting to exercise; to practice yoga, deep breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation; to stretch; or to take a walk. Techniques like these help the body to manage emotions by giving it another outlet through which to process stress. *Progressive muscle relaxation* is a great example. It is the act of gradually contracting and releasing muscle groups throughout the body. Not only has the practice proven to lower stress, but it also helps a body to develop the habit of recognizing and regulating it in the moment (Toussaint et al. 2021).

Social Actions

Social actions include building and using the connections of a social network for support and stress release, like talking with a friend or family member; expressing gratitude for others; performing a service; and laughing. The techniques help to reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression by releasing chemicals that support happiness and that work to calm down our nervous symptoms (MentalHelp.net 2023). One of the most effective is expressing gratitude, because it encourages the brain

to build the habit of positive thinking—finding “the good” in a situation, despite any stress the situation may have caused. Incorporating gratitude journaling or making a point to say thanks throughout the day are simple social actions to take (NIH Office of Communications and Public Liaison 2019).

Intellectual Actions

Intellectual actions involve making choices that build confidence and/or instill a sense of accomplishment: drawing; building; creating; saying a mantra; learning something new or seeking out a new experience; or writing. These types of coping actions significantly reduce stress because they help a person to focus on positive and/or confidence-building opportunities that involve the creation of something new (Scott 2020).

Mindful Actions

Mindful actions include taking the time to pause, to focus on the current moment, and/or to commit to being purposeful—focusing on only the sounds around you for one minute, for example, without allowing distracting thoughts to derail you from being present in the action of listening. They can also be referred to as spiritual actions because they connect our present selves with a greater/higher purpose, actions like prayer, meditation, visualization, and other religious practices. Mindfulness reduces stress because it activates the part of the brain that controls the stress response (Mindful Staff 2023). Its spiritual aspect imparts greater meaning, creating a healthier payoff in response to a stressor.

Table 1. Steps to coping with stress.

Step 1: Understand the Different Types of Coping Skills	Step 2: Decide Which Skill to Utilize	Step 3: Take Action
Problem-focused	Act to reduce the stressor	Physical action
Social coping	Utilize social connections for support	Social action
Emotion-focused	Reduce negative emotions associated with the stressor	Intellectual action
Meaning-focused	Use logic, reason, and/or the intellect to understand the stressor	Mindful action

Final Thoughts

Although stress is a natural and inherent part of our lives, it can overwhelm any person, young or old, if left unmanaged. That is why it is important for everyone to learn how to work with it more healthfully by learning about and applying the four types of coping skills. Research shows that managing stress effectively (in a healthy way) provides many benefits. The benefits include better overall health, reduced risk of mental health disorders, and nurturing resiliency or adaptability (Algorani and Gupta 2023).

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