

Use Your Coping Skills...In Advance?

Well-Being Tips ✦



Many people are familiar with the concept of coping skills. Coping skills are the methods we use to deal with stressful or challenging situations. Typically, we think of coping skills as something we use in the moment or after a stressful situation has occurred. But what if there was a way to cope with stressful situations before they happen? There is! “Coping ahead” is an emotional regulation strategy that allows us to plan for coping with stressful situations, so that if they happen, we feel more confident that we can handle them. You can practice coping ahead with a stressful situation you anticipate happening in the future by following these steps:

Step 1: Describe a situation in the future that is likely to bring up uncomfortable emotions or stress. Be specific when describing the situation. You might even try naming the emotions or behaviors that could make it difficult to cope skillfully. We’ll use the example of receiving a lower than anticipated score on a photography project to show how to use this skill.

- **Example:**
 - **Describe the situation:** Opening my laptop to view my grade on a photography project and learning that I received a lower grade than I had hoped.
 - **Emotions and actions that might make it difficult for me to cope:**
 - Embarrassment
 - Disappointment
 - Reviewing all the parts of my project that I believe I did poorly

Step 2: Choose the coping skills or problem-solving skills you would like to use in this situation. Write a detailed description of how you might cope with the situation in a way that is helpful.

- **Example:**

- I will speak to myself kindly, I will remind myself that everyone experiences setbacks sometimes, and it is okay to be disappointed
- I will look for the positives, I will remind myself that receiving constructive feedback is an extremely helpful way to learn
- Rather than focusing on the weaker points of my photography project, I will write down the things I did well
- I will go for a walk and call a trusted friend to talk through my feelings

Step 3: Imagine yourself experiencing the potentially stressful situation. See if you can visualize yourself in the moment of the stressful or unpleasant event.

- **Example:**

- I imagine myself sitting at my desk. I can see a cup of tea to my right, and my open laptop in front of me. I click on the grade for my photography project and see a lower grade than what I was hoping for appear on the screen.

Step 4: Practice coping effectively in your mind. Imagine yourself, in detail, doing exactly what you would do to cope effectively with the stressful situation.

- **Example:**

- I imagine myself taking a few deep breaths and a sip of my tea.
 - I imagine myself kindly telling myself that it is okay to feel disappointed and that setbacks are a normal part of life.
 - I imagine asking myself what might be helpful about receiving a lower than expected grade. Did I learn anything valuable about photography? Does this present an opportunity to connect with and learn more from my photography instructor?
 - I imagine opening up my photography project and writing down a list of five things I think I did well.
 - I imagine getting up to go outside for a walk and call my best friend.
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Step 5: Engage in relaxation after you visualize coping ahead. You might try breathing in for a count of five and breathing out for a count of seven repeatedly until you feel calmer. You might also try listening to some relaxing music or spending time in nature.

- **Example:**

- I find a comfortable spot to lay down on my sofa. I close my eyes and practice inhaling deeply for five seconds and exhaling for seven seconds. I repeat this for about five minutes until I feel relaxed.

You can try “coping ahead” with a situation coming up in your life that you anticipate may be stressful or prompt unpleasant emotions. Doing so may help to increase your confidence that you can navigate the situation effectively. It can be helpful to practice using the cope ahead skill with minor anticipated stressful situations before attempting to use it for more significant stressful situations.

References

Linehan, M.M. (2015). *DBT Skills Training Manual*. The Guilford Press.

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