

Coping Skills for Caregivers and Children

The following are some helpful ways to manage difficult feelings. Parents, these are helpful things you can learn and practice first and then teach your child. Kids, these may seem cheesy or lame to start but give them a fair try, what have you got to lose!

First Things First: Caregivers

Reflect and Connect

Simply telling your child to “Do your coping skills.” when they experience emotions is not the way to use this guide. What must be done instead is to first understand their concerns. When someone appears “emotional” or “overwhelmed” we can sometimes ignore or downplay their feelings. This only serves to frustrate them and make things worse. Begin by asking yourself, “*What emotion(s) are they feeling?*”. Once you understand what your child is feeling, your next step is to Reflect and Connect with your child. Why? Because when people feel understood and connected to someone else, they can begin to deescalate. Below are some ways to show someone that you understand them which we can do by Reflecting and Connecting with them.

Ways to Reflect and Connect

- Warmly stating: “*I can see you are angry* (or sad, frustrated, hurt, scared, etc).”
- Clarifying what happened by saying: “*When (this event happened) you felt really angry (mad, afraid, anxious, etc.)*”.
- Joining with them by:
 - Sitting with them
 - Lowering the tone of your voice
 - Seeing things from their point of view
 - Listening and not trying to fix it before they feel understood and you have all the information.

These are just a few ways to connect with someone who is experiencing elevated emotions. There are loads of other ways to connect with someone, but the options above are a great place to start. By connecting with others when they are emotionally overwhelmed we allow them to feel understood. We can do this by putting their emotions, not our solution, first. Until we deal with the emotional aspect of someone’s experience,

most any other attempt will either fall sort or even worse, damage the relationship. When people feel understood, they are more open to outside input.

You've Felt Like This Too

Think of your child's emotional state like a time you went to see a doctor about an issue you were having, but that doctor doesn't really listen to you. When the doctor comes in the room, instead of listening to your concerns, they tell you what might be wrong with you without ever listening to you. They don't ask clarifying questions or express that they understand what's going, they just talk at you. Ever been there? It's not very fun and it's even less helpful. Not only do you feel ignored, frustrated, or overlooked but the doctor's diagnosis probably isn't even right because they didn't take the time to understand the issue at hand, your issue.

So, please, take the time to understand the issue at hand when someone is emotionally overwhelmed. Connect with them in their feelings instead of trying to get them to push their feelings away or "just get over it already". If you do this for your child, you'll be surprised how they open up to you and how they are more able to use coping skills below.

General Coping Skills

The following are some helpful ways to manage difficult feelings. Parents, these are helpful things you can learn and practice first and then teach your child. Kids, these may seem cheesy or lame to start but give them a fair try, what have you got to lose!

Practice Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is a simple technique that's excellent for managing emotions. Not only is deep breathing effective, it's also discreet and easy to use at any time or place. The beauty with this is that you can actually slow down your heart rate by using this technique! It's science!

First breathe in through your nose, hold the air in your lungs, and then exhale slowly through your mouth with your lips puckered as if you are blowing through a straw. The secret is to go slow: Time the inhale (4s), pause (4s), and then exhale (6s). Benefits can come after just taking a few deep breaths but for maximum effect, practice for 3 to 5 minutes.

Don't feed the unhelpful feeling

When we experience emotions, an action or behavior typically follows. If you are angry, you might argue or fight. If you are sad, you might withdraw or shutdown. If we can change our actions, we can change our feelings by doing the opposite of what our first instinct might be.

For example instead of yelling when you are angry, try talking quietly and behaving politely. Sure this sounds confusing or irrational at first, but have you ever felt less angry after yelling or fiercely arguing your point? The answer is almost always no. Next time, try the opposite. Speak quietly and respectfully instead of yelling.

This also works if you're feeling down or sad. You can visit and talk with friends or family. Yes, it will probably feel weird at first and that's common. Remember when you do this, you are doing the opposite of what you might want to do so it makes sense that it might feel funky. The more you practice this, the more comfortable it will feel and the easier it will become.

Anger

Learning what anger feels and looks like

It's important to know your warning signs. Anger warning signs are the clues your body gives you that your anger is starting to grow. When you learn to spot your warning signs, you can begin to address your anger before things escalate. Here are some of the most common warning signs, which of these do you feel? After reading this, see which others you notice in the future as you begin to feel angry.

- Breathing faster
- Can't let go of a problem
- Feeling hot or flushed
- Clenching fists
- Becoming argumentative
- Talking louder/Raising your voice
- Using verbal insults
- Starting to sweat
- Aggressive body language
- Go quiet / "shut down"

What to do with anger in the moment

1. Practice Deep Breathing - (See above instructions)
2. Take a Timeout - Take a few deep breaths and think instead of reacting. It may also mean leaving the situation that is causing the current source of your anger or simply stopping a discussion. In relationships, be respectful of others and let them know

when you will come back from the timeout to resume the conversation (note that I didn't say argument). When you return focus on having a conversation about the issue, not an argument or fight.

3. Focus on something else - If you can distract yourself for even 5 minutes, you'll have a better chance of dealing with your anger in a healthy way. Ways to distract yourself could look like: taking a walk, listening to relaxing music, writing down what you're frustrated about, and more. Remember, you can always return to the source of your anger later—you're just setting the problem aside for now to let things calm down before addressing them further.

What to do with anger after the fact

It is important to reflect on what happened after an angering event. Most people don't want to revisit it, but if you can understand what happened this time you can change it next time.

- Write down what happened piece by piece, as if you're a reporter recapping the event. Be honest with yourself but try not to be overly critical. We all mess up and if you're doing this then you are already working on it.
- Make note of what some of your triggers are/were. Ask yourself, "*What specific thing (or things) happened that I felt so angry about?*". Writing these out can help you be more mindful of them in the future.
- Explore why that particular event, comment, action, etc. impacted you. Remember that other people can't "make you" feel things so take ownership of your feelings. Once you do this you can begin to make sense of them. "If you can name it, you can tame it"
- Anger is like an iceberg. With an iceberg, nearly 90% of it is hidden under the water. Anger is usually the 10% on top of the water so what makes up the 90% under the water? Is it pain? Betrayal? Sadness? Regret? Take time to think and write down what makes up your anger, what is the root?
- Process what you find with your counselor, a trusted family member, or a friend.

Anxiety

Some warning signs for anxiety include:

- Excessive worrying
- Tense muscles
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability
- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Rapid heart beat
- Sweaty palms
- Trembling/shaking
- Shortness of breath

Not all of these strategies will work for you. Self-experiment to find out which techniques you prefer. Context is important too; you may find that some strategies work in some circumstances but not in others. Experiment to observe what works best, and when. Deep Breathing (yes this one again!)

1. Drop your shoulders and do a gentle neck roll.
2. State the emotions you're feeling as words, e.g., "I feel angry and worried right now." (Aloud, to yourself.)
3. Massage your hand, which will activate oxytocin.
4. Take a break from your phone.
5. Ask yourself if you're catastrophizing, i.e., thinking that something would be a disaster, when it might be unpleasant but not necessarily catastrophic.
6. Recognize if your anxiety is being caused by someone suggesting a change or change of plans. Understand if you tend to react to changes or unexpected events as if they are threats.
7. Scratch something off your to-do list for the day, either by getting it done or just deciding not to do that task today.
8. Check if you're falling into a thinking trap.
9. Go for a walk or run.
10. Find something on YouTube that makes you laugh out loud.
11. Call a friend you haven't talked to in awhile.
12. Jot down three things you worried about in the past that didn't come to pass.
13. Jot down three things you worried about in the past that did occur, but weren't nearly as bad as you imagined.
14. Write your thoughts/feelings in a journal
15. Practice mindfulness- being fully aware in the present moment
16. Create a list of positive affirmations for yourself
17. Limit caffeine intake.

Depression

Some helpful building blocks:

Start Small - Break activities into smaller pieces. Some activity is better than none.

Make a Plan - Set an alarm as a reminder, or tie an activity to something you already do. For example, practice a hobby immediately after dinner every day.

Bring a Friend - Including a friend will increase your commitment and make it more fun.

Sometimes when you or someone else feels depressed the tendency is to isolate and stop doing the things that we used to enjoy. Even though it may be difficult, the following are some different things that can help people feel more like themselves.

1. **Find (or return to) a hobby** - Find or get back to something that you enjoy doing. Sometimes we need to mix it up to find a new spark. Be patient when trying this as you likely won't feel great right away, give it time.
2. **Take care of yourself** - This one can be tough when you don't feel like it BUT if you're not caring for yourself, then who will? Practicing proper hygiene like bathing, brushing your teeth, going for a walk, eating healthy, and are vital to improving mood.
3. **Be creative** - When you feel down or depressed, you can do something with that feeling or begin to understand it in a new way. Get some colored pencils, crayons, paint, or anything else you might like to create with and start a project.
4. **Write it down** - Grab a notebook, a pen, and start writing. Write anything. You can write a short story, a summary of the last week, what you're feeling right now, or each thought that passes through your head. Our thoughts can race, spiral downwards, or just downright be confusing. Writing things down helps us begin to wrap our mind around things more effectively.
5. **Get involved in... anything!** - The tendency when we feel down is to unplug from life but one of the best remedies is actually to reconnect with others. Rejoin an old group or find a new one where you can engage with others.
6. **Exercise** - Don't skip over this one! Exercise may be at the bottom of your list of things to do but it is such a beneficial one! It doesn't matter if you have never exercised you can start by walking around your neighborhood, jogging through a park, riding a bike, doing push-ups in your bedroom, and more. Start small and celebrate anything you do. Did you do your first push-up? Great! You did zero yesterday and you did one today, that is progress!
7. **Google it** - There's tons of articles with other ideas, the list doesn't stop here!