

## Learning to Cope with Stress

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### What is Stress?

This may seem like an obvious question with an obvious answer. Everyone knows what it feels like to be stressed. If we come home from work and tell our spouse that we had a stressful day, they may ask what stressed us, but they usually don't ask what we mean by feeling stressed.

One way of viewing stress is that it isn't just what happens to us but how overwhelmed we are by events. Life involves change, but there are some changes which exceed our ability to respond to them.

There are several confusing aspects to the term "stress." First of all, stress can either refer to what occurs around us or our response to it. The external situation causing the emotional reaction is sometimes called the "stressor" to distinguish it from the internal reaction. Moreover, there are situations in which there is no external stressor, and yet our own negative thoughts still create an internal state of stress. In essence, we become our own stressor. Think, for instance, of a time when your boss may have seemed out of sorts. You may have worried that you had done something wrong. You may even have feared you were going to be fired, when in reality his/her upset had nothing to do with you.

Secondly, what is stressful for one person may not be stressful for another. If your boss were to say, "I want you to go on statewide TV and tell people about our new plant," some workers would find this to be very stressful whereas others would welcome it as a great opportunity.

Thirdly, there is physical stress, and there is psychological stress. While these overlap somewhat, they can also be different. Going on statewide TV is less a physical stress and more of a mental stress. Surviving an automobile crash begins primarily as a physical stress but may end up more as a psychological stress. Overlap can occur, such as in situations of caring for an elderly or dying person over a long period of time, which can be both physically exhausting and psychologically painful. Chemical and biological changes in our bodies designed to cope with injury can also occur in stressful social situations. Our bodies will generally mobilize internal physical resources to some degree no matter what type of difficult situation we are in.

Fourth, should we confine stress to those things which have happened to us without us doing anything at all to bring them on? Or should the term also include the stress we bring on ourselves? For example, should it include the stress that occurs when our friends become distant because we have been grouchy and withdrawn? Should it include what we do to ourselves inside our own minds as we worry about things which will never happen?

Some of these issues will be discussed further in the chapter/handouts to follow. The important thing for you the reader to understand is that

External stressors are reacted to differently by different people  
Stress is both a physical and mental process  
You can bring a lot of stress on yourself

### **“Good” Stress Versus “Bad” Stress**

Stressors are everywhere and are impossible to escape. They are not always negative. Many of them have positive effects on us mentally and physically. Jogging or playing tennis can be stressful, but we generally benefit from them. Life changes such as going to college, getting married, and having a baby are stressful events, but they also are generally positive, growth producing experiences. The modern inventor of stress research, Dr. Hans Selye, called good stress eustress (pronounced u-stress) because it actually enhances our physical and mental functioning. On the other hand, overwhelming stress, or stress which leads to prolonged tension can be destructive. He referred to this kind of stress as distress. So there is good, positive stress which is not only inevitable but actually beneficial to us, and there is negative, destructive stress which wears us down. But again, as soon as we become specific, new complexities arise. Giving a public talk can be constructive stress for some of us. We have to work hard to organize our thoughts and present a good image, but we may still be looking forward to the experience. For others of us, giving such a talk would be so overwhelming that it would produce distress. Caring for a family member who has a cold can be a constructive form of stress that enhances the bonding between two people. On the other hand, caring for a dying family member for months on end can have a destructive effect on us mentally and physically. Sometimes, it is not clear ahead of time what is going to be constructive and what is going to be destructive for us. If we are exposed to any constructive stress long enough without rest, it may start to have a negative effect. When we have chronic stress, our bodies may be permanently damaged. We may end up with a weakened immune system and physical or mental illness.

### **Stress at Work and at Home**

There are two main sources of stress for most people--the workplace and the home. These are also by the way the two places where some of our greatest satisfactions in life come from. It used to be thought that stresses at home were most important in determining women's sense of well being and that stresses at work affected men's emotional state more. However, this has been found to be an overly simplistic view. It now appears that men and women are becoming more similar as society changes. There are strong similarities between the two sexes in terms of what is stressful for them. Today, most women work outside the home at some point, making what happens at work more important. Moreover, there are also greater expectations for fathers to be emotionally connected and involved in the home, making this area more important in their lives.

Work stress and family stress are now equal opportunity stressors. For both men and women, there are now two main areas of stress rather than just one. For both sexes who work outside of the home, self-esteem appears to be more affected by work related stress, and mood appears to be more affected by stress from within the family. In other words, how we see ourselves and how we feel about our overall adequacy as persons appears to be most greatly affected by our jobs. But our family environment seems to be more influential over our emotions and how happy we

feel in general. One study has found some unusual differences between the sexes. While depression in both sexes was affected more by home than work stress, to the degree that work did affect depression, it did so more with mothers than fathers. This is just the opposite of what traditional roles might lead one to expect, and it demonstrates that conventional wisdom about the effects of stress is not always correct.

The quality of a marriage is very important in determining how much emotional stress men feel. Support from their wives has a lot to do with whether men are distressed or not. While women desire emotional support, too, they also appear to be very practically oriented. They greatly desire practical assistance from their husbands. Perhaps this is because traditionally they have been expected to do more of the housework and childcare, whether or not they were working outside the home. Working mothers tend to be very stressed when they are not receiving assistance around the house. They experience a lack of time to get everything done and a feeling of overload from coming home from work and not receiving help.

What causes stress at work? Some of the things which have been found to cause stress and depressive symptoms in the workplace include

- Authoritarian supervisors who do not provide support and do not allow for open discussion of problems.
- Role ambiguity. This occurs when it is unclear what is being expected of workers.
- Lack of control and less autonomy to do your job.

There are certain types of situations which are more stressful than others:

- Having to perform a high number of behaviors in a short period of time
- Having responsibility to make decisions or make the "right" decision without clear information afterwards about the correctness of choices.
- Having to make decisions involving choices between the lesser of two evils
- Coworkers and bosses with personality problems who are angry and/or unpredictable
- Being given jobs to do but without the needed resources to perform them

Of course, there are many other types of stress that a person might encounter on a job. Personality conflicts can occur. Feeling that your opinions and creativity are being ignored can be upsetting. Some persons may feel stressed from feeling that their pay does not reflect their abilities and contributions. Similarly, reaching a point where promotion no longer seems possible can be extremely frustrating.

While both work and home provide individual sources of stress, the combination of the two appears to be extremely disturbing to individuals. It appears that persons can often tolerate stress at home, and they can often tolerate stress at work. If home is stressful, they can get away by going to work. If work is stressful, they can get away by going home. But when both are stressful at the same time and there is no respite, symptoms may more quickly develop. Another problem which can occur is the tendency of some people to take work home with them. This can happen, for instance, if the individual tends to be overly devoted to work, so that a job becomes

more important than relationships and relaxation. It can also happen, however, when work has become so stressful that you think about or even dread what is going to happen at work the next day. It is generally best to create a boundary in your mind between work and home, so that stresses from one spill as little as possible into the other.



## **Points to Ponder**

*Sometimes what is stressful to one person is not stressful to another person. Giving a speech may be stimulating to one and very frightening to another. What determines what is stressful for each one of us? Can you think of things that are stressful to you that are not stressful to others? Can you think of things which are stressful to others but not stressful to you?*

## **Daily Hassles**

Research has shown that our stresses are not limited to major events, such as getting married, having children, changing jobs, divorce, moving, and so on. These all clearly place us under a certain amount of stress, even if it is positive stress. However, there is a whole other group of stresses which are small yet seem to exert an equal if not even more powerful effect on our moods from day to day. These are called “daily hassles” or “microstressors.” These are the small things, such as being stuck in traffic, having an argument with our spouse, and so on. Coping with these is just as important as coping with the large, major stressors which occur less frequently in our lives.

In addition to the direct impact significant life events have on us, they also send out shockwaves of smaller stresses. For example, having one’s spouse die is a very powerful event in itself. But it also requires a variety of adjustments which are in themselves stressful. For example, the death of a spouse may make it necessary for us to become more knowledgeable regarding finances and investments. It could also mean that we have to manage with less money; have to learn new tasks such as cooking or taking care of a car; and have to develop new friendships and social groups.

Losing a job is another example of a major stressor that can send out waves of minor stressors. It can cause us to have to move to another city. This in turn means locating a new house, packing and moving, setting up new checking accounts, making new friends, adjusting to a new job, and so on. Research has shown that the accumulation of small stressors can trigger depression or anxiety.

## **What is Coping?**

In the face of life’s stressors, humans have a remarkable capacity to adapt and change. We are able to adapt to changing life conditions and to solve problems. However, sometimes when we are overwhelmed, we must somehow not only find ways of dealing with the external situation but also with our internal feelings of frustration, depression, anxiety, and anger. In a sense, any response directed toward managing change is a type of coping, but we generally do not say that a

person is having to “cope” with something until they encounter a situation which creates strong unpleasant emotions or taxes their resources. For example, if we are in college or high school and we have a minor test over material that we know well, there is little to cope with. We simply focus our attention and take the test. However, if we feel that the test exceeds our ability to remember answers or to think up responses, or if we experience significant test anxiety, then our ability to deal with the situation becomes strained. The individual experiences a high level of stress and now has to “cope” with the situation.

Not all coping responses are positive and healthy. Paradoxically, sometimes our coping itself becomes a new problem. Drinking, using drugs, losing our temper, and sleeping long hours can all be attempts at coping which bring on more problems than we had before. Another example of coping that may cause problems is dissociation. Following a trauma, an individual may automatically block out certain memories related to what happened. However, this way of dealing with anxiety seems to actually create more problems in the long run. Blocking out memories, thoughts, and feelings keeps an individual from dealing with the problems that he/she faces. (Technically, this may be called a defense mechanism rather than coping because it is an automatic response rather than a result of conscious effort. While there is disagreement about what distinguishes a coping mechanism from a defense mechanism, some researchers also argue that coping focuses on the present whereas defense mechanisms focus more on the past. However, this issue is not yet resolved.)

### **Active Problem Solving Versus Passive Coping**

Many psychological researchers today divide coping into two types: active, problem solving coping and coping which seeks primarily to soothe unpleasant feelings. This latter form of coping is sometimes referred to as passive coping and sometimes as emotion focused coping. In active, problem focused coping, the aim is usually to change the situation facing the person. In passive, or emotion focused coping, the aim is to calm or soothe the feelings they are having about a situation.

When a person attempts to change an external problem it often leads to feeling better because they know that something is being done--that they are exercising some control. As a general rule it is better to do something to impact the situation, even if it is a small step, rather than to do nothing. The individual is now confronting the problem, which can bring about a greater sense of optimism since they have a sense of direction and can see that the situation may be improved. They may also begin to feel a sense of mastery as they learn effective ways of dealing with their problem. Another active approach is the process of finding new ways to look at and think about a troublesome situation. For example, a person might decide that their situation is not all that bad considering what other people have to face. They might tell themselves that they have faced worse problems before and overcome them. They might remind themselves of the strategies that they used in the past to solve similar problems. Thus, one type of active coping is aimed at control of the outside environment while the other is aimed at one's own thoughts and making them more positive.

Doing something about your problems may not always lead to feeling better immediately. It takes time to change some situations. Problem focused coping can even bring on some discomfort as persons first begin to encounter the distressing situation. However, as active

copied efforts begin to produce changes in the problem, then improvement in stressful feelings generally occurs as well.

A different coping approach involves trying to express, soothe, or escape stressful feelings. Some people try to cope with their feelings mainly by ventilating them. Others try to cope with them by pushing them down and trying to pretend that they are not having particular feelings. Still other persons may do things to calm unpleasant emotions, such as watching TV or eating. All of these types of coping tend to be more passive. An excessive reliance on this type of strategy appears to hamper persons from getting over their problems and can lead to them to being more depressed in the future. It has been found that active ways of coping are generally more helpful than the passive and emotion focused ways of coping. Some studies have shown that women are more likely than men to use emotion based coping strategies. The negative effects this can have are illustrated In a study of pregnant women. Those who relied on wishful thinking as a coping mechanism were more likely to suffer later from postpartum depression. Women who used more of the active type of coping, such as working on their problems directly, had lower levels of depression following childbirth.

There are some forms of emotional coping, however, which are likely to be somewhat helpful in the long run. Emotions are built into humans for a reason. They need to be dealt with and actively processed. The problem with using emotionally focused coping occurs mainly when people

1. use it exclusively instead of combining it with problem focused coping
2. try only to soothe or ignore feelings rather than actually facing up to them, acknowledging them, and processing them.

In stressful situations, it is important not to run away from feelings. It is helpful and even necessary to be in touch with them. That does not mean that they have to be focused on constantly. That can be very destructive. Healthy coping neither involves a total release and expression of feelings nor a total suppression of them. Rather there has to be a balance between the two. Emotional competence, now sometimes being called “emotional intelligence,” involves a variety of abilities including awareness of one’s feelings; the ability to communicate them; the ability to discern what others are feeling; and the ability to empathize with the feelings of others.

All of this may seem confusing. Are emotion focused coping strategies helpful or harmful? At the present point in research, it would appear that they are not helpful if they are the primary form of coping. On the other hand, there is value in processing emotions as part of an overall strategy of dealing with the problems at hand.

Even escapism has its place, as long as it is a minor part of the overall coping strategy. There are some relatively safe and harmless forms of escapism as well as some unhealthy ones. Going to a movie or reading are relatively benign. Drinking and using drugs are negative forms of coping because they make it harder to deal with the actual problem situation and create new problems that were not there before. When men use escapist coping, they are more likely than women to turn to drinking alcohol. While both men and women often use TV to escape, current trends suggest that a new form of escapist coping is immersing oneself in computer use for hours on end.

## Getting Personal

*Here are some examples of both active coping strategies and passive, emotionally focused ones. Which of these do you tend to use under stress?*

### ***Active Coping Strategies***

*Getting information to work on a problem and fix it*

*Seeking advice from someone*

*Brainstorming possible ways of responding to a problem*

*Choosing a solution and following through on it*

*Gathering the resources you need to deal with it*

*Experimenting with different solutions*

*Finding new ways of looking at the situation (such as reminding yourself that you have dealt with this or similar problems before)*

*Challenging any excessive or distorted negative thoughts about the situation*

### ***Passive Coping Strategies***

*Waiting for something to happen ("hoping for a miracle")*

*Eating more, smoking cigarettes, using drugs, or drinking alcohol*

*Sleeping more*

*Watching TV, immersing yourself in the computer, or otherwise distracting yourself from the problem in a passive manner*

*Spending money*

*Withdrawing and spending time alone*

*Denying to yourself that there is a problem*

*Worrying and obsessing about the problem*

## **Optimistic and Pessimistic Coping Styles**

One way of describing a person's coping style is whether it is optimistic or pessimistic. This tends to remain constant across the life span of an individual. Both optimists and pessimists are confronted with unpleasant situations, but optimists are more likely to view the causes of their problems as changeable.

Optimists and pessimists approach problems differently. They differ not only in how they expect things to turn out but also in how much faith they have in themselves to be able to solve problems. Pessimists tend to be burdened by crippling doubt and to find themselves paralyzed--unable to move forward against their difficulties. Optimists are more persistent in their problem solving approach. They see the possibility that something can be done. They are more likely to seek out information about their problem. While one might expect that pessimists would dwell on their concerns in a negative manner, this is not necessarily the case. Because they believe that there is not much they can do about many problems, they are more likely to use denial and to try not think about their difficulties.

When pessimists are explaining a problem or failure they had in the past, they are more likely to

say that they failed because of some personality trait, i.e. some ongoing shortcoming of theirs which has not changed. They view whatever held them back in the past as likely to hold them back in the future. This could be lack of intelligence, emotional “weakness,” being “unlucky,” and so on.

Optimistic persons tend to use more problem solving coping, since they believe that with perseverance and effort, a solution can be found. Pessimistic persons use more escapist coping. They generally think, “Why try? There’s nothing that can be done that will improve the situation. I might as well try not to think about it.”

Whether a person is optimistic or pessimistic tends to predict how happy and contented they will be in the future. This has been found to be true for persons in a variety of types of stressful situations: persons going through surgery, persons with breast cancer, couples going through fertility procedures, and caregivers to persons with medical conditions. Not only are pessimists likely to be less happy and more depressed at a later time, their style of coping has been found to lead to poorer performance in sports, less productivity at work and school, and higher rates of death from coronary heart disease.

Another example of the wide ranging impact of optimism or pessimism is in the area of lifestyle changes. When starting a program of exercise and diet change, optimists are more likely to follow through. This is not surprising, since such programs require a belief that all of the hard work and sacrifice is going to pay off in some way. It is likely that pessimists stop short of their goals because of their lack of confidence that they can truly impact their health.

Here is a summary of differences in coping between optimists and pessimists:

<i>Optimists</i>	<i>Pessimists</i>
Information seeking Active coping and planning Positive reframing Seeking benefit Use of humor Acceptance	Suppression of thoughts Giving up Self-distraction Cognitive avoidance Focus on distress Overt denial
(Carver and Scheier, 1999)	

One way of overcoming a pessimistic coping style is through the use of cognitive therapy techniques. This approach, which is outlined in chapter/handout #3 “Coping with Negative Thinking,” helps persons to combat unrealistic negative thoughts. Another approach to dealing with pessimism is assertiveness training, in which persons learn ways of tackling interpersonal problems. Information on this approach can be found in chapter/handout #4. Problem solving techniques can be found in chapter/handout #5 “Coping with Worry and Anxiety.”

### **Coping with Failure--The Importance of Flexibility and Perseverance**

People have different ways of viewing and coping with failure situations. Some assume that their failure means that they did not try hard enough and that with greater effort, they can still succeed. On the another end of the spectrum are people who think that failure is a result of not being smart enough or talented enough and that this is not going to change. The effects of these two different ways of thinking are profound. Persons assuming that they simply have not been persistent enough generally tend to keep trying to find new solutions, whereas persons assuming that their failure was a reflection on their innate ability or intelligence tend to feel more helpless and to give up. Even at a young age, children are influenced by these two styles of thinking. When faced with a difficult task, children viewing success as coming from innate qualities (smart versus dumb, talented versus untalented) tend to give up. This is a helpless attitude. In other words, they feel that if they couldn't do it the first time, they won't be able to succeed on future tries. Children who view success and failure as a matter of motivation and effort tend to continue working on a difficult task, attempting to solve it. Some studies have shown that when children are praised for their intelligence, they tend to give up when they encounter difficulties later on. When they don't succeed, they decide that they just weren't smart enough after all. These children were also more likely to falsify their results in order to continue to “look smart”. When children were praised for their effort rather than for their intelligence, however, they were found later on to continue to try hard in the face of difficulty.

When facing a difficult problem, it is important not to view success or failure as proving that you are smart or stupid, strong or weak. Instead, look at difficult situations as requiring more perseverance and flexibility from you. This way of seeing a situation is more likely to keep up your morale and energy so that you can continue to work at overcoming obstacles. If you do fail at something, look for ways that you might have succeeded if you had kept at it, or if you had been more flexible. In that way, you are more likely to keep from falling into a hopeless state of mind.

## **Some Specific Types of Coping Strategies**

### **Obtaining Information**

One type of problem solving coping is to obtain all of the information possible in advance of a stressful situation. This is why, for example, airline pilots are trained in emergency simulations. They are well versed in the nature of problems and what to do for each one. In hospitals, it has been found helpful for patients going through surgery and other medical procedures to have as much advance knowledge as possible. Those with the advance information generally need less medication and tend to be discharged from the hospital sooner than those who are not prepared. In laboratory research, persons who are given information about a stress ahead of time feel less anxiety and are able to perform better on stressful tasks. This has important real life implications. Meeting with a boss to go over an annual job performance evaluation would be one example. The more a person knows ahead of time of how the evaluation will be conducted and what the criteria for evaluation are, the less stressed they are likely to feel and the better their performance is likely to be.

How can information be obtained? Sometimes, it can be found in the library or on the internet. Other times, it may be possible to ask a friend who has been through a similar experience. It is possible that at times, you might be able to afford to consult an expert. In job situations, you can ask for ongoing feedback from your boss about your performance rather than remain in the dark about how she feels.

### **Problem Solving**

This type of coping involves clarifying the nature of the problem, brainstorming alternative solutions, evaluating the alternatives, and implementing a solution. Problem solving is discussed in more detail in Chapter/handout 5 “Coping with Worry and Anxiety” and in Chapter/handout 15 “Coping with Anger.”

### **Approaching Major Tasks One Step at a Time**

Sometimes just getting through the day can feel like a burden for a person who is already overloaded with stress. But when major difficulties or tasks arise, such as having to fill out extensive tax forms, make repairs on the house or car, and so on, a person who is already feeling anxious or depressed can be absolutely overwhelmed. One strategy in this situation is to break the larger task down into smaller components. By looking at only one step at a time, the problem can become more manageable.

Assume, for example, that it becomes clear that a new roof is going to have to be put on your house. This is the kind of task which a depressed or anxious person might procrastinate over because it involves considerable thinking, decision making, energy, not to mention the expenditure of considerable money. The task might be broken down into several component parts like this:

Checking to see if insurance will cover the damage to the old roof  
Going to the library to read about roofs and roof repair

- Talking with friends about what they know and recommend
- Calling roofers in the yellow pages and talking with them
- Making a short list of three roofing companies
- Getting estimates
- Making decisions

In depression, just getting the housework accomplished can be very stressful. For the depressed individual, the essential chores can be divided into smaller ones. Cleaning house doesn't have to be done all at once. If a person can only handle one room or task at a time (such as dusting) before resting, that can be sufficient.

## Time for Practice

*Make a commitment to work on several problems in your life. Write down actual dates when you will get started. If one or more of these problems seem overwhelming, divide it into smaller, more easily accomplished goals. Take one step at a time. You will find that even small steps will eventually bring you closer and closer to your goal.*

## Social Support Seeking

The presence of a strong social support system has been shown to help prevent depression and other psychological difficulties. It has also been demonstrated to help people recover from physical illnesses such as heart disease. Furthermore, the degree of support received, especially from family members, has a strong influence on whether someone is likely to relapse back into depression after they recover.

The power of social support would appear to be so great as to be almost a panacea. That is, it would seem to be helpful in almost any type of psychological or even physical problem. It needs to be kept in mind, however, that there can be a considerable difference in the quality of support that different individuals provide. Some friends and family are very poor at providing helpful support and may even be "toxic." If friends give bad advice, criticize you, or act disinterested, it can make you feel worse. If they offer quick, easy solutions and then become impatient when you don't automatically implement them, you may feel more inadequate. Sometimes friends and family are eager to help but simply do not understand exactly what is needed from them. It is important to clearly state what you want. Some persons are reluctant to state their needs so that they can be met. Their attitude is that if they have to ask for support from family or friends, then it is has little worth or value. But there is really no reason why other people should automatically know what you need.

Since it is the quality and not just the quantity of social support that is vital, it is important to surround yourself not just with friends and acquaintances, but persons who are optimistic, positive, and capable of being helpful. These kinds of friends provide high quality support. They really listen and try to understand what you are feeling. They also find the right balance of knowing when to give suggestions and when not to intrude.

## Writing

A series of research studies has documented the effectiveness of writing about the stresses and traumas people experience. People have been shown to benefit from writing down feelings about past traumas. This was more than just recounting the facts onto paper. Persons limiting their writing to objective descriptions of situations generally obtain little or no benefit, whereas persons focusing on the emotional aspects of their past problems generally had fewer doctor visits in subsequent months and experienced improved physical health in general. The process also decreased depression in many persons. In other studies, persons have been instructed to write about problem situations they were currently undergoing. This had somewhat different effects. Again, their physical health seemed to benefit from the process. However, the focus on emotions did seem to heighten their experience of certain unpleasant feelings, such as anxiety.

### **Reframing Stressful Situations**

Another way of actively coping is to find a new way of looking at a situation which makes it easier to deal with. Sometimes, simply viewing the problem differently can put everything into a new context and cause stress levels to go down. This is called “reframing.” This could involve, for example, realizing that other people have worse problems than you or that you have successfully dealt with similar or worse problems yourself in the past. It could also involve making an effort to see the silver lining in a situation, such as how you might learn something from it. Reframing can sometimes help us to change from seeing something as a major problem to seeing it as minor.

<i>Stressful Way of Viewing Situation</i>	<i>Possible Reframe</i>
My son is out of control. He's growing up to be a delinquent.	Most kids go through a difficult phase. They don't all grow up to be criminals. Maybe he's just going through a phase. I need to be careful about overreacting.
My husband plays golf with his friends a lot and doesn't spend as much time with me as I want. He doesn't care about me.	He was a very independent and active man when I married him, and that's part of what attracted me to him.
I'm just don't know what to do about my problems. I should know what to do.	It's not unusual for anyone to come across some type of situation that they haven't encountered before and don't know how to handle. Maybe I can learn something from this situation that will help me in the future.
This situation is so painful and difficult for me to deal with, I don't know if I can stand it.	I've handled situations like this before. I'll handle this one, too.

### **The Search for Meaning**

Reframing can sometimes be seen as a searching for meaning or purpose in a situation. It may perhaps be true that human beings can tolerate a lot of things, but they cannot tolerate meaningless suffering. The search for meaning is a way of easing distress by putting a situation into a broader context.

Stressful events often undermine or even destroy some of our basic beliefs about the world. For example, we may view the world as an orderly place where random terrible events do not happen (at least, not to us) and/or we may believe in the basic justice and fairness of the world. But these beliefs may be suddenly shattered by some terrible event. This can happen, for example, when one becomes a victim of a crime or natural disaster. When basic beliefs are eroded, people either reestablish a new sense of meaning or develop a more cynical attitude about the world.

Research has shown that there are particular ways that people go about trying to find meaning. One way that people attempt to do so is by understanding what caused their problem. This may be a purely objective understanding, such as "My son died from cancer." Or it can involve larger philosophical and spiritual ideas, such as "God caused this to happen." A very negative way of finding a cause is to blame one's self: "If I had chosen to take the other job, I wouldn't have been laid off. It's my fault that I don't have a job. I made a bad decision and chose the wrong one."

Or alternatively, people sometimes find meaning by looking for a benefit that can come out of their situation: "It's true that I'm suffering now, but it will help me to be a stronger person in the future." Or they may look to find ways that a situation might benefit others. For example, some

parents of children with cancer might feel that the experience the doctors gained from treating their child with certain drugs would benefit other children in the future. The four ways of looking for meaning can be viewed in the following way:

	<b>Looking for a Cause</b>	<b>Looking for a Benefit</b>
<b>Regarding Self</b>	What did I do to cause this?	How can I learn, grow, or benefit from this?
<b>Regarding Others</b>	What has caused this to happen?	How can my situation help someone else?

Persons can perceive a stress as a challenge rather than a threat. For example, some people have religious or philosophical beliefs that challenges in life sometimes occur as a part of a greater design to bring about personal growth. Reminding themselves of their own beliefs in this area can be a helpful coping mechanism. Persons also sometimes remind themselves that despite their stress, they are actually still better off than many other people (“I know that I’m very sick, but only 50 years ago, doctors wouldn’t have had any way of treating me at all. People used to die of this illness”).

The search for meaning is intensely personal. The meaning of a situation cannot be given by one person to another without seeming simplistic and even uncaring. The search for meaning is a journey each person takes alone or with someone they are close to. However, here are some ways of looking for meaning which research has shown people to use:

“I have developed better, stronger relationships with my friends, wife, and children.”

“I have changed for the better. I have more (patience, tolerance, wisdom).”

“I have new insight on what is important in life; I have changed my goals and what I am striving after.”

“My illness taught me a lesson that I need to be taking better care of myself or else something worse will happen to me.”

“I realized just how caring other people can be towards me.”

“Life is more precious now. I’m not just existing anymore. Life is to be lived fully.”

People who are able to find some type of benefit are more likely to have a positive adaptation to their problem. For example, research has shown that mothers who have children in intensive care and who are able to find positive meaning and benefit tend to have less depression later on. But even more interestingly, their infants tend to be more developmentally advanced later on than when the mothers cannot find such meaningful benefit. Similarly, men who can find a meaningful benefit from heart attack are generally in better cardiac health in subsequent years than men who cannot.

It may not always be possible to find meaning in a situation. Moreover, there are some types of meaning which may make persons feel worse. Attributing the cause of a negative event to oneself or others may lead to realistic problem solving as one begins to understand the true nature

of a situation. However, it may at the same time create depression or anger.

### **What If Positive Reframing Isn't Possible After Stressful Events?**

There is no doubt that some situations are so catastrophic that they drastically alter our world view. We are bereft of our previous view of the world as a just or benign place. We begin to see it as malevolent, violent, or unjust. To actually find a positive benefit after a horrifying event just may not be possible. But it is still important to find a way of viewing the world somewhere in between the extremes of kind and just on the one hand, and totally malevolent and threatening on the other hand. Some type of in-between view is still necessary in order to maintain mental health. Many persons are able to do just that--find a more complex way of seeing the world which still gives some personal comfort. There is an integration of the old, very positive world view with the new facts and circumstances, producing a more complex view where some positive elements still exist.

### **Coping through Leisure Activities**

While almost everyone experiences stress on the job, for some persons the duration and amount of stress reach a point that has been termed "job burnout." This is sometimes defined as resulting from physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion. At this point, the person usually has lost the feeling that they are doing something worthwhile. Job burnout in one employee can affect the stress level of other employees, and job burnout in a spouse can affect the stress level and emotional well being of the other spouse.

A typical prescription for this kind of stress has been to get away from work--to take a vacation. But is this really useful? The answer seems to be a qualified "yes." Taking time away from the job has been shown to have healthful effects--even if it is only for a single day. Improvements in blood pressure, heart rate, and other physiological indicators of stress can be brought about in this way. But some research suggests that not just any vacation is useful for burnout. Length and timing of vacations are important. Benefits of taking time off tend to last for three days up to about three weeks. For some individuals, five vacation days spaced to provide several three day weekends may be more effective in reducing stress than a single five day vacation. This is especially true if job duties pile up and immediately overwhelm the person upon their return to work. The quality of vacation is also important. For some persons, family stresses and strains during a vacation can negate the positive effects that they might have experienced from taking the time off.

More and more, modern businesses are looking at a different kind of "vacation" or time away from work. Time is sometimes provided for employees to meditate, "power nap," exercise, or something similar. Having an opportunity to relax and be refreshed for 15-30 minutes each day may be very important for employee well being and productivity.

### **Keeping Your Priorities Straight**

When dealing with stressful events, particularly the stress of everyday hassles and pressures, it is important to have a guiding set of principles and values for what is really important in your life. By deciding that family relationships or some other value is supreme in your life, you can take

away the ability of work stress and time pressure to engulf you. When things become hectic, you can remind yourself that your life will not be

### **Allow Time to Put Some Distance Between You and Your Problems.**

Not all stresses and painful feelings can be reduced immediately. Sometimes, feelings take time to go away. Sometimes they have to be endured for a while before the mind allows them to subside. Thus, it may be helpful to give yourself permission to be human and have some unpleasant feelings for awhile. Don't push yourself to move on too soon. Time provides a kind of distance between people and events and allows the development of new perspective in understanding problems. Another kind of distance is physical distance. Persons often feel better when they remove themselves from the physical situation which reminds them of their stress. Going out of town for a weekend, or even getting out of the house, is often useful.

### **Other Coping Strategies**

**Using Humor.** Studies have shown that laughter boosts the immune system. It also improves mood and energizes persons, probably due to the release of endorphins in the brain. You can bring more humor into your life by watching comedies, reading humorous anecdotes and books, going to a comedy club, and learning to tell jokes.

**Work.** If a person's job is not the source of their stress, then going to work can actually be a form of coping. Persons who are working appear to benefit from having to leave the house, travel to another place, and become involved in an activity. The routine of getting up, taking a shower, and going to work can be energizing and help take one's mind off of problems. The human tendency is often to stay home when anxious or depressed, but that is not likely to be beneficial when dealing with stress. If a person does not have a job, then scheduling activities throughout the day can be helpful.

**Exercise.** Numerous studies have shown that there are positive effects on one's mental health and sense of well being from exercise. Even aerobic exercise three times a week for 20-30 minutes at a time can bring down levels of depression. Not only does it provide a distraction, but it also appears to create positive biochemical changes within the body. However, the exact nature of these changes is not known.

**Spiritual coping.** While humans have known for millennia of the benefits of spiritual coping, only in recent years has there been scientific evidence to support these beliefs. To those persons who have religious beliefs, there is no need for such evidence. But the point that needs to be made here is that there is no longer the rift which used to exist between science and religion regarding the value of spiritual coping. If you have a spiritual tradition, or are interested in developing one, you are likely to find that the use of prayer, meditation, worship, and other spiritual resources will improve your overall state of mental well being. For many persons, the participation in organized religion brings an added benefit of a social support network. In an era when many persons move often and find it difficult to establish new relationships in each city or town that they live in, churches and synagogues are often the quickest way to feel a part of a neighborhood or community.

**Altruism.** Many persons find that helping others lowers their own stress level. While this may seem paradoxical, there are good reasons why this may be true. One possibility is that it focuses the person's attention away from their own problems. Moreover, they may find that compared to the situations of persons they are helping, their own dilemmas appear less serious. Helping others also tends to increase one's self esteem. Finally, as was emphasized in the section on the search for meaning, the helping person may reaffirm their own ideas of the meaningfulness of life by taking the time to reach out to others.

**Relaxation/Meditation.** A variety of psychological problems benefit from relaxation. It is especially helpful for coping with muscle tension, anxiety, and anger. There are a variety of specific relaxation techniques, including progressive muscle relaxation, hypnosis, yoga, meditation, and biofeedback. The effects of these techniques appear to go beyond improving our emotional state. They also have consistently been found to improve physical health and the immune functioning of the body. For more information about relaxation, see chapter handout 5 "Coping with Worry and Anxiety."

**Appropriate Use of Prescribed Medications.** When stress and anxiety are overwhelming to the point of preventing a person from functioning, medication can be a valuable or even necessary coping tool. For example, if a person is so bothered by a divorce that they cannot sleep and obsess about problems all night long, then matters may be made worse by being sleepy and not able to function at work the next day. This in turn may lead to poor work evaluations and more stress. A vicious cycle can be set up which creates more symptoms and then more difficulty functioning. Chapter/handout 17 on antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs discusses the use of medications in the overall treatment of depression and anxiety.

## **Some Final Thoughts on Coping**

### **When You are Most Stressed, Begin by Playing to Your Strengths**

Under severe stress, it is important to use your strengths. When major life changes are occurring, or when you are very depressed or anxious is not a good time to overhaul your personality. If you are a person who normally relies on clear thinking, then in a stressful situation, your mind is going to be one of your best assets. On the other hand, if you are a very outgoing person and you mix easily with people, then being active and socializing may be your best form of coping. This does not mean that other types of coping can't be helpful as well. In fact, the idea that a variety of coping skills need to be learned is the whole point of this chapter and of this book. But when you are at your very lowest point, it may be best to play to your strengths. There exceptions to this, however are:

- if your therapist deems that it is time for you to try some new coping behaviors
- if you have been trying the same thing over and over but with negative results
- if you have begun to improve and you have more energy to try new types of coping

## **Getting Personal**

*What kinds of strengths do you have that you can use in coping?*

- Intelligence*
- Good social skills and ability to mix with people*
- A large group of friends*
- Athletic ability*
- Persistence*
- Problem solving abilities*
- A strong family unit*
- Friends who care about you*
- A church, synagogue, or other spiritual resources*
- Participation in an organization in which you feel like you belong*
- An ability to read well and use information resources*
- A sense of humor*

### **Avoiding the Blame Game**

Blaming is a dead end street. Persons who use blame a lot may turn it either inwards towards themselves or outwards towards others. Oftentimes, they believe that someone has to be to blame--either they themselves or somebody else. Actually, the choice is more fundamental--is there anyone to blame anyone at all? Getting caught up in the blame game often leads to being angry or depressed. Psychological energy is being used up by focusing on who should be blamed thereby taking away energy which could be used to work on the situation. If you blame yourself, then you are going to feel guilty and more depressed. If you blame others, then you are going to be angry and perhaps alienate people whom you need as friends. Now, it is true, that sometimes other people are to blame for our problems. If this is the case, then so be it. But watch out for wasting energy on this.

### **Getting Personal**

*Make a list of the typical ways that you cope when you are under stress. Write down ten or more different actions that you use. Then list beside each one the strengths and weaknesses of that coping behavior. For example, if watching TV tends to be what you do when under stress, then you might write:*

<i>Coping Activity</i>	<i>Strengths and Weaknesses</i>
Watching TV	Feels better for a little while, but nothing really changes. Problem is still there later on. Sometimes feel worse afterwards, feeling that I have wasted time.

<i>Coping Activity</i>	<i>Strengths and Weaknesses</i>



### **Time for Practice**

*Select one new type of coping to practice. Try it out like you might take a car for a test drive. It may seem strange or unnatural. It may even seem artificial. But give it a chance. See how it makes you feel, not only when you first try it but also at a later point in time. Some types of coping will make you feel better when you first try them, and others will bring a sense of relief and satisfaction later on. As time passes, new behaviors usually start to feel more “normal” and natural. But in evaluating a new coping behavior, how you feel is not the only criterion. Ask yourself whether your problems have improved because of trying the new behavior.*

## Further Reading for Clients

- Davis, M., Eshelman, E.R., & McKay, M. (1995). The relaxation and stress reduction workbook. Oakland, California: New Harbinger.
- George, M. (1992). Learn to relax: A practical guide to easing tension and conquering stress. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Selye, H. (1976). The stress of life. New York: McGraw-Hill.

## Further Reading for Therapists

- Lazarus, R.S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer.
- Meichenbaum, D. (1985). Stress inoculation training. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Snyder, C.R. (Ed.) (1999). Coping: The psychology of what works. New York: Oxford University Press.

Note: The table on characteristics of optimistic and pessimistic coping was taken from Carver, C.S., & Scheier, M.F. (1999). Optimism. In C.R. Snyder (Ed.) Coping: The psychology of what works. New York: Oxford University Press.