

SECTION 6: PRACTICAL APPROACHES TO IMPROVING COPING SKILLS

Below is an elaboration of some of the coping skills suggested in Section 5 for the prevention and management of stress. It is intended to be read at your leisure. Experiment and find out what works best for you, then use the techniques consistently.

Building a positive self-concept

*Feel good about yourself;
you are the one person who
needs to feel that way.*

—CPB



Self-concept is an organized collection of beliefs and feelings about oneself which changes over time. A healthy self-concept is a realistic but appreciative one and differs to some extent in different interpersonal situations. Your self-concept is acquired primarily through social interactions that begin with your immediate family and continue with the other people with whom you come into contact throughout life. The crucial elements of self-concept include a sense of individuality, self-acceptance, self-appreciation, self-worth, self-love, self-respect and self-esteem.

Self-esteem refers to how one evaluates oneself in positive and negative terms. Self-esteem is comparative to the point of maintaining a realistic base for one's thoughts and actions and increasing one's wealth of knowledge. It is competitive only to the extent that one strives to improve those aspects of the self that one has singled out for change and to achieve those goals which one has set for oneself. Such evaluations are based in part on the opinions of others and in part on how we perceive specific experiences. Interestingly, negative self-perceptions lead to more predictable behavior than positive ones.

Persons with good self-esteem realize that they are special and unique and that they do not need to be someone else. At the same time, they accept that they are not perfect and that in certain areas others will perform or behave better than they and that there are things about them that might need to be changed. Overall, persons with good self-esteem feel good about who they are and they tend to be friendlier, more expressive, more active, more trusting and less troubled by inner turmoil than persons with poor self-esteem.

Persons with good self-esteem can make mistakes, fail or receive criticism without concluding that they are worthless. They do not hinge their esteem on people or things, as they realize that these can disappear. On the other hand, persons who lack self-esteem often do things to win the approval of others, rather than for self-satisfaction or because of personal convictions.

Persons with good self-esteem tend to cope better with stressful situations because they view such situations as challenges rather than stressors. They also find it easier to commit themselves to families, interpersonal relationships and organizations, as they believe that they have something to offer. They also accept that we all need help and encouragement at various times in our lives.

Persons with good self-esteem are secure in their own sense of worth, and they do not need to boast, since boasting reflects a need to win the approval of others. Persons who find it necessary to control or to be unkind to others are usually lacking in poor self-esteem as well.

Building self-esteem begins with self-evaluation and self-acceptance. Following are some important initial steps in coming to terms with your individuality.

1. Identify your strengths and your weaknesses. Accept those weaknesses which can't be changed and change those which you want to change. Acknowledge your strengths and use them wisely.
2. Accept your right to life and your equality with others and cultivate a sense of belonging. Love and be kind to yourself. Respect the rights of others and do not use other persons or allow yourself to be used.
3. Know right from wrong and negative from positive. Develop your own rules for living.
4. Know what you want out of life. Make your own decisions and have faith in them—take control of your life.
5. Do not allow yourself to be pressured by others but do not close your mind to alternative views either—they may be useful.
6. Always think through the consequences of your actions carefully and never lose sight of reality. When you have made your decision, communicate it assertively to those who need to know and take full responsibility for the consequences of your actions.
7. Always praise yourself for a job well done and acknowledge when you have made a mistake—for to err is human.
8. Remember that ups and downs are part of any normal life. Do not allow negative comments to get you down, instead respect the right of others to have opinions which differ from yours.
9. Be honest with yourself and accept that the truth will not always be pleasant to face, neither does it always have to be spoken. Learn the art of forgiving yourself and of forgiving others.
10. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and wallowing in self-pity—that gets you nowhere.

11. Boost the self-esteem of others and assist those in need of and willing to accept assistance—these can be real self-esteem boosters for you in return.

Clear thinking

Stop blaming other persons for your short-comings, it serves only to delay the solution of the real problem.

—CPB



Thinking is a very complex process; it refers to the ideational components of mental activity which include processes used to imagine, appraise, evaluate, forecast, plan, create and motivate. Ordinary thought is far from logical and quite often we jump to conclusions based on inadequate or inaccurate evidence.

How we perceive a given situation will affect how we approach and cope with it. Our perceptions are in turn governed by our beliefs and our attitudes, which may be influenced by the positive and negative suggestions of others. Positive, rational thoughts can herald the dawn of new opportunity and achievement while unfounded negative and irrational thoughts can damage self-confidence, paralyze mental skills and decrease performance. Nonetheless, justified concerns and cautions are always necessary if we are to make informed decisions.

In this day and age, it is often very difficult to think positively as the world repeatedly attempts to flood us with negativity, fear, despair, guilt and sorrow. Despite the difficulties, one needs to replace unfounded negative or irrational thoughts with realistic positive affirmations and in turn cultivate a positive attitude to life and its challenges. The first step at achieving this goal is being aware of one's thoughts—you cannot replace thoughts of which you are not aware.

Below is a list of the most common negative thoughts that we tend to have and examples of the negative self-talk or self-defeating behavior which such thoughts may give rise to:

- (1) **Over-reacting to situations**, i.e., attaching much greater significance to an event than is indicated. An example would be the case of a female believing that because a male asked her for a dance at a party that he is in love with her.
- (2) **Dwelling on the negative aspects of a situation**. Suppose that you attend a party and notice that there is a small stain on your clothing. The more you think about it, the more uncomfortable you become, until eventually you are too upset to enjoy the party any longer.

- (3) *Assuming that things will always go wrong no matter what the available evidence suggests.* Examples are believing that no matter how well prepared you are for an examination that you will still fail, or that you could not survive if your partner were to break off their relationship with you.
- (4) *Not accepting that things will sometimes go wrong despite our efforts.* An example of this negative self-talk is: "The world is just not kind to me—would you believe that after all the effort which I put into my last project, it still failed?"
- (5) *Believing that our worth as human beings depends on our achievements and our attainment of perfection.* For example, "If my life were worthwhile, I would not make mistakes."
- (6) *Believing that everyone must love us and approve of almost everything that we do.* "My head of department does not like me and this makes me feel like less than a person."
- (7) *Treating feelings as if they were fact.* "I feel like such a failure that I must be a failure."
- (8) *Preoccupation with the faults of others without making allowances for their fallibility.* "I cannot stand her, she is always making mistakes and just the sight of her makes me angry."
- (9) *Rejecting or trivializing the positive.* "Thanks for your compliment, but what I did was not really very significant, anyone could have done that."
- (10) *Believing that it is wrong to think highly of oneself.* "Self praise is no praise."
- (11) *Believing that one has no control over one's feelings with respect to various situations.* "I can't help feeling sad in light of what has happened."
- (12) *Constantly worrying about a feared event.* For example, perpetual worry about one's admission to hospital for elective surgery.
- (13) *Believing that it is easier to avoid one's difficulties and responsibilities than to face them.* "I just need to get away from all this; once I do, life will be so much easier."
- (14) *Believing that denial of a given situation will cause it to disappear.* "I am not pregnant, my period is just a few weeks late and it will come soon."
- (15) *Blaming other persons for our actions.* "She forces me to hit her."
- (16) *Seeing ourselves as more involved in negative events than we are.* "It is my fault that my schizophrenic daughter did not complete her law degree."

- (17) *Labelling ourselves and others.* "I am a born loser."
- (18) *Using our past experiences as an excuse for our present behavior and contending that because of such experiences our behavior cannot be changed.* "I grew up in a house where all my relatives drank alcohol daily so I cannot stop drinking it now."
- (19) *Believing that pleasure can only be derived from relaxation and recreation.* "Hard-work could never be pleasurable."
- (20) *Hinging one's worth and happiness on external occurrences.* "I can't be happy or feel worthwhile unless I complete my masters degree in two years with a grade A."
- (21) *Believing that for life to be enjoyable it must be easy.* "I can't enjoy life if I am faced with so many problems."
- (22) *Constantly hiding one's feelings.* "I cannot allow other persons to know the way that I really feel."

Goal-directed behavior

*If you don't know where
you're going, it is easy not to
know when you've arrived.*

—CPB



One of the most common sources of stress for a number of persons is a feeling that life is just passing by. This can be a very unnerving feeling. To avoid this dilemma one needs to set realistic goals for oneself after careful evaluation of the tasks at hand and the resources which are available. Unrealistic goals undermine performance. Care has to be taken that a quest for excellence does not kill the very effort.

Goals need to be well-defined, otherwise their attainment may go without recognition and they must be constantly re-evaluated, to ensure that they are still appropriate. Overall, self-determined goals lead to better performance and goal attainment enhances self-confidence and future performance.

Goals may be either short-term, medium-term or long-term but it has been found that the setting of sequential short-term goals lead to better overall performance than setting a single distant goal. This may be so because the reinforcement of successive small steps is much more motivating than the reinforcement of a single large step which may take some time to reach

When you are making plans for the future, identify short-term, medium-term and long-term goals, write them down and prioritize them. Make sure to spread out stressful tasks so that they don't all occur together. Pay close attention to punctuality, reliability and quality of performance.

Decide how to go about achieving each identified goal and allocate available resources wisely. Always be under-committed. Set a reasonable completion date for each goal but allow a little more time than you think it should take and decide how you will measure the successful completion of the goal.

Chart on a calendar when you will be scheduled to work on each goal, knowing that something planned on the calendar frees the mind from worrying about it and helps you to focus on one thing at a time. Work at whatever pace is comfortable for you. Periodically, review your plans and make changes as necessary. At the beginning of each week, it is wise to plan events for each day of the upcoming week.

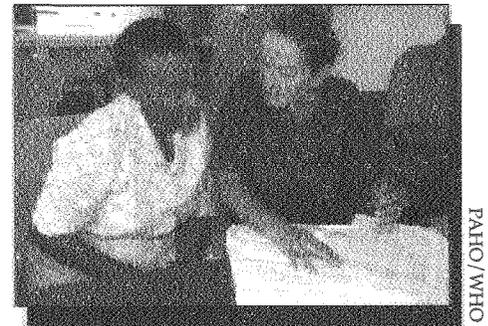
If a task seems overwhelming, try breaking it up into smaller tasks that can be dealt with more gradually. When starting a new task, forget about perfectionism or about failing—just proceed step by step as everyone else does. Be creative and flexible but do not jump from task to task.

Be self-reliant and resourceful but delegate as much as necessary—have faith in others. Be ambitious and seize new opportunities but live within your means and strive for contentment. Motivate yourself. Be optimistic, disciplined and always persevere. Try to anticipate change and prepare for it well in advance.

Wise resource management

Maybe if you made better use of what is available to you and stopped longing for what is not, life would be so much more rewarding.

—CPB



Resource management involves knowing how to use our resources, e.g., time and money, to achieve our goals, to organize tasks so that they can be accomplished in a manner that is pleasing to ourselves and at the same time meets our obligations to others. The key to such management is accurate evaluation, planning and prioritization.

An important aspect of skillful resource management is having reserve supplies, e.g., food, water, money and other essentials in case an emergency situation arises.

The Value of Time

*To better appreciate the value of ONE YEAR,
speak to an unemployed, elderly person
whose pension has been delayed by ONE YEAR;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE MONTH,
speak to a person convicted of murder
whose appeal verdict is now overdue by ONE MONTH;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE WEEK,
speak to the manager of a major industry
whose staff has been on strike for ONE WEEK;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE DAY,
speak to a mother whose child's date
for major surgery was postponed for ONE DAY;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE HOUR,
speak to a student who arrived late
for an examination by ONE HOUR;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE MINUTE,
speak to an asthmatic being rushed to hospital
when the ambulance was delayed for ONE MINUTE;*

*To better appreciate the value of ONE SECOND,
speak to a bomb-blast survivor whose escape from
the building preceded the bomb's explosion by ONE SECOND;*

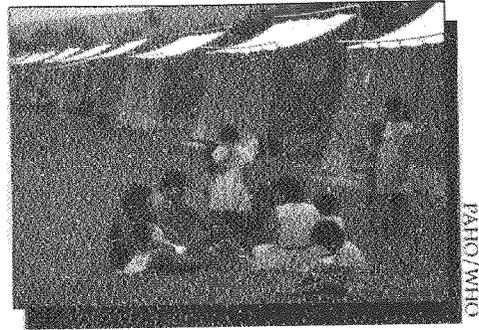
*To better appreciate the value of a SPLIT SECOND,
speak to an athlete who lost the 100 metre
Olympic gold medal by a SPLIT SECOND.*

*Time is a priceless resource which waits on no one,
It can neither be borrowed, bought nor stored,
So maybe the time has come for you
To stop letting your share drift aimlessly pass you.*

—Cyrilene P. Bryce

Effective communication

Utterances which are fuelled by rage are best left unsaid.



The way we communicate can make our interactions with other persons either stressful or satisfying. Effective communicators are polite and they express their thoughts, feelings and desires in appropriate, direct and honest ways. Above all, they are good listeners and observers. They seek to improve relationships, preserve mutual respect, and protect both their own interests, and the interests of others without undue guilt, fear or stress. Their communication gives them feelings of satisfaction, control and self-esteem. Be aware however, that one's assertiveness may draw great hostility from others.

In any situation, we can communicate with aggression, assertion or non-assertion.

Aggressive people dominate others through angry demands, threats, insults, shouting and even name-calling. Such persons have no respect for the rights and dignity of others and although they often get what they want done in the short-term, in the long-term most persons lose respect for them.

Assertive people face issues with direct, honest and appropriate communication. They consider the best interests of both themselves and others, tend to feel better about themselves and tend to be part of healthier interpersonal relationships.

Non-assertive people avoid the issue. As a result, they seldom get what they really want and consequently tend to harbor anger and resentment toward those who seem to take advantage of them. After a while, this anger tends to be self-directed. Also, relationships with others tend not to grow since people generally prefer friends who will take a stand and who will say what they feel.

Remember, it is your right to choose when to assert yourself and when not to. For example, when people whom we care about act unkindly towards us, we may choose to respond with understanding and sensitivity rather than asserting our rights.

The use of appropriate body language enhances the effectiveness of our communication. An erect posture brings respect. Facing the speaker and turning your shoulders towards them conveys interest. Relaxed gestures indicate confidence. Steady, relaxed eye contact that looks away occasionally indicates sincerity. Your facial expressions should be consistent with the message, e.g., do not smile when you are angry. Your voice should be neither timid nor intimidating.

To listen carefully you must use both your eyes and your ears. Very often persons say one thing but mean something quite different. Unless they are very skilled at keeping their emotions hidden we can usually discern what they are really trying to say by observing their body language. During a conversation, a good listener does not allow their attention to wax and wane, make hasty judgements, listen selectively or interrupt the speaker unnecessarily.

Improve and practice your language skills to allow yourself to clearly state what you feel and want. Develop interests so that you will feel in a position to meaningfully contribute to conversations. Ask open-ended questions. Since most people enjoy expressing their thoughts and feelings, such questions tend to promote interesting conversation. Exercise your right to ask for what you want but always bear in mind that your wants may not always be granted.

Although one should speak as the challenge arises, this is not always indicated. If you are overwhelmed with anger, calm down before speaking. If someone offends you in public, take the person aside and speak to them privately. If you can't think of an appropriate response then, deal with the issue when you can.

Over time, relationships grow closer and discrete self-disclosure is always useful. This fosters a sense of trust. Sincere expressions of appreciation are some of the greatest joys in life, for both the giver and the receiver. Reassure those who are close to you that you care and understand. Do not just assume that people know that you value them. Be generous with your compliments and affection. Expect some lags in conversation; these are natural, particularly as people spend more time together.

Express anger when necessary. Try to be as factual and non-judgmental as possible. Permit others the right to disagree with you but do not allow the issue at hand to be sidetracked, trivialized or dismissed. You need to bring up the topic as many times as necessary until it is understood. If you have clearly highlighted a concern to someone and the implications are understood by both of you but the behavior persists, then you may need to escalate the consequences. For example, if a store-assistant refuses to exchange a recently purchased item which is faulty, then you may need to speak to the store manager and if that fails then you may have to take legal action.

If you frequently respond to unpleasant situations with anger, try releasing your anger harmlessly through some form of physical activity, e.g., a walk, exercise, housework or gardening, so that you can deal with challenges more calmly.

Do not succumb to unreasonable demands—either ask that the unreasonable request be changed, suggest a compromise, delay until you have reviewed the situation, or just say "no".

When people are aggressive towards you:

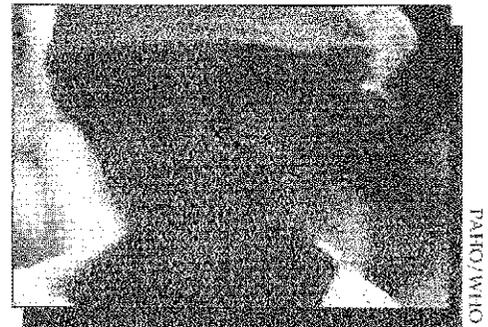
1. Turn away;

2. Disarm the aggression by setting clear guidelines for the conversation to continue, e.g., "I'll listen to you, but please calm down first", or just listen attentively;
3. Put an end to needless criticism by apologizing, promising to correct your error, indicating that enough has been said and/or enquiring why the person continues to try to hurt you; and
4. Seek clarification when aggression appears to be disguised.

Effective anger management and conflict intervention

The hostility which you perceive from others may be the hostility which you are sending them.

—CPB



Anger management

Anger is a normal response to internal and external events that cause us significant displeasure. It seems to be a pervasive emotion and like all emotions is accompanied by a physiological response. Unresolved anger is a common source of stress for many people.

Anger provokes aggressive feelings and behaviors where aggression (emotional, verbal or physical) refers to the intentional infliction of harm on others. Males tend to be more spontaneously aggressive than females but when provoked males and females do not differ appreciably in the levels of aggression they exhibit. In addition, males demonstrate higher levels of physical aggression than females but females tend to demonstrate higher levels of verbal and indirect aggression than males. Both cultural and biological factors are responsible for these differences.

Anger may vary in intensity from mild irritation to intense rage. People who are easily angered tend to have a low frustration tolerance. The effects of anger may be either positive or negative depending on the circumstances and how it is expressed, but generally speaking, anger can be very destructive when it is intense, chronic or expressed inappropriately.

Anger has an important role to play in our lives and the major problem is not whether or not we experience anger but how we manage it. For example, we cannot lash out at every person or object that irritates or annoys us; neither can we pretend that things are rosy when they are not. Unfortunately, a number of persons were socialized to believe that it is wrong to feel angry and consequently they internalize their feelings of anger (with its ill effects) without ever having mastered the art of managing such feelings.