Adaptive and Non-Adaptive Coping Thoughts

© Coping

Exercise

(15 min

Client

<u>M</u> No

Coping is described as the process of managing the demands of a stressful event. A person who can cope with a stressful event can master, minimize, or tolerate the stress that is associated with the event. People differ in the way in which they deal with challenging life events. While some people give up and succumb to their despair, others persist and face life's biggest challenges with hope and resilience. Research has identified four main coping styles: overcontrol, under-control (or passive coping), active coping, and surrender. Overcontrol and under-control (passive coping) are maladaptive coping styles, while active coping and surrender are adaptive coping styles.

Regarding overcontrol and under-control, whereas people often underestimate the amount of personal control they have over events, there are, nevertheless, limits to personal control in any situation. In some situations, the only way to enhance personal control may be to let go of control. Maladaptive coping refers to situations in which there is no fit between the controllability of the stressful situation and the choice of coping strategy. People may exert more control (overcontrol) than they have or not enough control (undercontrol) over the situation (Strentz & Auerbach, 1988; Vitaliano et al., 1990). Overcontrol is often characterized by obsessive thinking. In attempts to control the uncontrollable, individuals find themselves solving problems in their head. Plagued by thoughts and images of disastrous outcomes that may never be realized, the individual becomes trapped in an endless process of 'figuring it out.'

Under-control, or passive coping, means that individuals exert less control over the situation than they assumed. People who engage in passive coping tend to deny responsibility and relinquish the control of the stressful situation and of their reaction to that situation to others (Field, McCabe, & Schneiderman, 1985). Examples of passive coping strategies include complaining to others to cope with difficult feelings, get sympathy, or elicit their help; withdrawing from challenging activities; or relying on self-medication (i.e., illicit drugs of over-indulging in alcohol) to cope with the situation.

Active coping refers to strategies that are directed at problem-solving, and it entails taking direct action to deal with a stressor and reduce its effects (Zeidner & Endler, 1995). These strategies aim to either change the nature of the stressful situation or modify how one thinks and feels about it. People who engage in active coping rely on their resources to deal with a situation. Examples include solving problems, investing more effort, seeking information, or reframing the meaning of the problem.

Surrendering is an effective way of coping with certain challenges, such as those where exerting control is non-productive and even counterproductive. Examples include trying to fall asleep or trying to get rid of negative thoughts. Counterintuitively, people who try to control their sleep often find themselves awake for hours. Similarly, people who try to "get out of their head" and stop their thoughts often find themselves producing more

thoughts and spending even more time "in their head." The solution here is not to exert less control but to surrender to the uncontrollable and accept that there is simply nothing one can do to change the situation.

This tool is designed to educate people about these four different ways of coping with adversity and, through the example of a current personal challenge, to understand how they are currently coping. Clients first become aware of the coping style that they are using to deal with a current challenge, and subsequently, they are assisted in developing a more adaptive way of coping if needed.



Author

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Goal

The goal of this tool is to help clients (1) become aware of the coping style they are using to handle a current challenge and (2) learn a more adaptive way of coping, if needed.



Advice

- It is important to note that surrendering differs from or being overtaken by emotions or being controlled by others. Being overtaken by emotion occurs without choice while surrendering is an active, intentional process where people agree to surrender. Further, surrendering differs from giving up and losing hope. Surrendering is a process of letting go of unproductive efforts to control the uncontrollable while at the same time focusing on what lies within the boundaries of personal influence.
- Advise clients that although one may not always be able to change a difficult situation, one can always change the way he or she responds to the situation.
- This exercise can also be used as homework. Clients may use the form in the appendix to record their coping-related thoughts.
- After many years of engaging in negative thinking, some clients may find it difficult to consider alternative, more constructive thoughts to their problems. These clients may benefit from the practitioner assisting them with step 6, which asks them to consider more helpful alternative thoughts. The practitioner may offer suggestions or ask questions to elicit more helpful thoughts.



References

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- Strentz, T., & Auerbach, S. M. (1988). Adjustment to the stress of simulated captivity: Effects of emotion-focused versus problem-focused preparation on hostages differing in locus of control. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 55, 652-660.
- Vitaliano, P. P., DeWolfe, D. J., Maiuro, R. D., Russo, J., & Katon, W. (1990). Appraised changeability of a stressor as a modifier of the relationship between coping and depression: A test of the hypothesis of fit. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 59, 582-592.
- Zeidner, M., & Endler, N. S. (1995). Handbook of coping: Theory, research, applications. John Wiley & Sons.



Adaptive and Non-Adaptive Coping Thoughts

This exercise is about understanding the different ways of coping with challenging life events.

Step 1: Describe a challenging situation In the space below, describe a current challenging situation.

Step 2: Observe your thoughts

Consider your thoughts about your ability to cope with this situation. For instance, has the thought "There is nothing I can do" crossed your mind? Write down as many thoughts as you have had (and can remember) about your ability to deal with this current challenge in the first column of the table in the Appendix.

Step 3: Learn about the different types of coping thoughts

People deal with difficult situations in different ways. In general, we can differentiate between helpful and unhelpful ways of dealing with situations. Dealing with challenging situations is also known as "coping." In this step, we explore four different ways of coping with situations, two helpful and two unhelpful ways. A detailed description, including examples of thoughts that accompany these styles, is provided in Figure 1. Helpful ways of coping are displayed in the upper part of Figure 1 (the gray squares), the unhelpful ways of coping are in the lower part (the red squares).

Fig. 1. Helpful and unhelpful styles of coping and thoughts



ACTIVE COPING

You take responsibility and look for options. You try to take charge of the situation and your emotions as much as possible. If the situation cannot be changed, you still deal with your emotions.

SURRENDER



You can let go of things you cannot control. You take responsibility for what is under your control but are also aware of the limits of your control. You know when your efforts to change things do not work anymore.

- What can I do to make things better?
- What have I learned in the past that will help me get through this?
- How do I want to be in this situation? What kind of person do I want to embody right now?
- What can I learn from this event?
- What can I do to take care of my own needs in this situation?

- What should I invest my energy in and what
- When is enough enough?
- When will my efforts make a difference?
- If there is nothing I can do, what can I do?

COPING STYLES

- It's no use trying to change things.
- There is nothing I can do.
- I don't have what it takes to deal with this.
- I have no clue how to deal with this.
- X and Y are to blame for this.
- Why me?
- Life always treats me badly.

- If I don't fix this, everything will fall apart.
- I must succeed, no matter how big the costs.
- I have to push myself harder.
- I must keep everything under control.
- I have to be perfect.
- I have to fix everything.
- I must be strong at all times.



PASSIVE COPING

You are not taking charge of the things that happen in your life. Although there are steps you could take to change things or deal with your emotions, you are not taking these steps.

OVERCONTROL



You spend too much time and effort trying to figure things out or make them work or go your way. You are afraid that if you do not rigidly control things, they will turn out badly. When you overcontrol things, you overestimate the effect of your actions. You believe there is more you can do than you actually can do to change things.

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Step 4: Identify coping style(s) from thoughts

Think back to what you learned in step 3 and look at the thoughts you listed in step 2. For each thought, ask yourself, which of the four coping styles does this thought belong to? Write the name of the coping style in the second column of the table in the Appendix.

Step 5: Helpfulness of coping style

Now, think back to the difficult situation you described in Step 1. For each of your thoughts (Step 2), consider whether the thought is helpful or not. That is, do you or don't you believe that this thought will help you deal with the situation effectively, either by changing the situation itself or your feelings about it? Write down your responses in column 3 of the table in the Appendix.

Step 6: Moving toward more helpful alternative thoughts

For those thoughts that you identified as *not* helpful, try to reframe these thoughts into more helpful, adaptive thoughts. For this step, it may be helpful to look over the examples of active coping and surrender thoughts again (Step 3), as these are the two more adaptive coping styles. Write each of your revised thoughts that you deemed unhelpful in the last column of the table in the Appendix.

Step 7: Reflection How was it to do this exercise?

What did you learn?

What could be the consequence of changing your thoughts?
What steps could you take to change the way you cope with challenges?

Appendix

Thoughts	Coping style reflected by this thought	Helpful? Yes/No	More helpful alternative thought
Why does this happen to me?	Passive coping	0N	Although this is a difficult situation, many positive things happen to me