

10 COPING STRATEGIES

When You Feel Out Of
Control Over Your Life

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Introduction

There are a host of events and circumstances that can occur in our lives that can make us feel a sense of loss of control in our lives. When these situations arise they lead to anxiety and stress which causes the body to produce the “fight or flight” stress response. This response leads to the release of hormones in the bloodstream that travel to locations in the body and bring about specific physiological, psychological, and emotional changes.

These changes are designed to help the body deal with the perceived threat (whether real or imagined). Such changes include enhanced activity in the amygdala and subduing of the areas of the brain responsible for rationalization.

These changes heighten the sense of danger and urgency and limit our ability to process information. In turn, we become even more anxious and fearful which enhances our stress response even more. This can make it feel as though we are completely losing control and going crazy. When the stress-response persists for a prolonged period of time, the body can experience increased levels of anxiety, fear, and stress even after the stressor has ceased (Folk, 2020).



At the core of feeling out of control is the need for certainty. When we have definite answers, timelines, or predictable outcomes we feel empowered to make decisions, take action, at the very least we know what to expect.

However, when in a scenario where there is no certainty or definitiveness, this makes us feel as though we have no power or authority given the circumstance. This lack of certainty leads to rumination which initiates a cycle of anxiety, fear, and stress response that repeats itself continuously (Cohen, 2011).

Control is the exertion of influence over one's environment or the actions and/or behaviors of another. When a person begins to feel as though they are losing control it can cause them to attempt to excessively use control in response to the fear of the ambiguous and unpredictable. When implemented incessantly, control can become overwhelming and negatively influence behavior, relationships, and quality of life. This control can manifest as trying to micromanage people, actions, and behaviors and maintaining rigid rules (Good Therapy, 2019).

While it seems good or logical to counteract a loss of control with hypercontrol, it actually works against you and creates even more stress which can fuel the feeling of loss of control even more.

As we obsess over people, actions, behaviors, and rules it adds pressure and can build to become too much to deal with. Small mishaps and events can become major events and triggers that push us over the edge and lead us towards feelings of hopelessness, despair, and powerlessness.



Additionally, our perception can be swayed to see situations and people as unsafe or dangerous, leading to avoidant and other toxic behaviors. We can also build barriers/walls that prevent us from making decisions or moving forward in life (Schaub, 2020).

When we begin to feel as though we are losing control, a host of symptoms can also manifest in the mind and the body as a result. Mentally, one might experience racing thoughts and feelings of hysteria or panic.

This can lead to a lack of impulse control, increased emotional reactivity, and increased aggression. Physically, one might experience an increased heart rate, gastrointestinal issues, headaches and migraines, chronic pain, or the feeling of getting ready to pass out (Folk, 2020).

10 Coping Strategies When You Feel Out of Control Over Your Life

When dealing with circumstances you cannot control, you don't have to be completely powerless. There are measures that can be taken to help re-establish a sense of general control and calm that can help make navigating the circumstance more bearable and ultimately more survivable. The following outlines ten of those coping strategies and the way they work to help when you feel out of control over your life.

Shift Your Perspective

Very rarely are we actually in a situation that is 100% out of our control. What is more likely to be the case is that our heavy focus on the negatives and challenges of the situation causes us to panic and become convinced that we lack little or any control in the matter.

However, when we shift our perspective from a focus on those things we cannot control we can begin to emphasize those things that we can control within the situation and develop a more positive mindset and perspective.

While the circumstances themselves may be out of our control, we can always control our thoughts, behaviors, and actions. This then puts us back in a position of control and authority.



This process is referred to by existentialists as confronting angst. It's about accepting responsibility for those things within our power and releasing responsibility for those things we have no power to influence or change (Folk, 2020).

Embrace Uncertainty

An essential part of learning to cope when you feel out of control is learning to embrace uncertainty. It is the hyper-focus on the uncertainty that leads to fear and anxiety which feeds feelings of loss of control.

Learning to see uncertainty as an unavoidable and inherent part of life helps to release the hold of fear, leading to a more reasonable response. When we embrace the fact that we can't control the outcome and therefore are not tasked with the responsibility of doing so, we can then relax.

Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of intentionally focusing attention on the current moment and embracing that moment free from judgment. It involves paying attention to what is happening in the mind, body, and the surrounding environment, and approaching those things with both curiosity and compassion.

The practice of mindfulness bolsters awareness of thoughts, sensations, and feelings while also improving our ability to cope. mindfulness leads to enhanced mental clarity, a greater sense of well-being, and better ability to care for self. This strategy is so useful when you feel out of control because it acts as a grounding force.



When you can slow down, pause, and focus on the current state of things mentally, physically, and environmentally, you can calm the chaos in your mind and refocus attention away from stressors towards those things that can facilitate peace.

Seek Support

The fact is, very few of us can go it alone. We all need support from others from time to time and this can be especially true when we feel out of control. One way people can offer support during these times is by listening and allowing us to vent.

This emotional release of thoughts and feelings can help us to rationalize the events and situations causing us to feel a lack of control and help us process and respond to them better.

The support of others can also help us navigate these seasons of feeling out of control by actually offering us tools and resources to assist us in coping with the stressor(s). At times, a lack of control can result from feeling incapable or ill-equipped to deal with the situation that has sprouted.

Therefore, by having the help of others we can be in a better position to deal with our situations and feel more prepared and in control as a result.

Explore Possible Outcomes

Often, feeling out of control of life can be connected to not knowing what to expect. The fear of the unknown can drive you to worry, become anxious, and even lead to panic. A way to cope with this is to brainstorm as many potential outcomes of the current situation. Doing so helps you to explore all the possibilities.

At best, you can then plan and prepare for these possibilities so you don't feel caught off guard or out of control if one of them arises.

At the least, you have an idea of what to expect and can reduce stress and anxiety levels.

Establish A Routine

When there are things going on outside of your control establishing a routine can be a vital asset. Routines operate as a grounding force by giving us a set of activities or processes that we know will remain consistent.

Amidst situations that can be very unpredictable and chaotic, establishing something that is very reliable and consistent can help combat the anxiety and regulate the mind back to a state of calm.



Stress Reduction Measures

Implementing practices that work to reduce stress also work to reduce anxiety, fear, and worry that accompanies the feeling of being out of control. Such measures can include things like meditation, yoga, listening to music, or aromatherapy.

Honestly, the measures can be specific to each individual so long as the primary purpose and function is to set aside intentional time to combat stress. Implementing these practices both improves our ability to deal with stress while also actively decreasing our stress levels.

Workout

Being physically fit during times of life that feel chaotic and out of control can go a long way for helping us cope. When we exercise there is a release of chemicals in the brain such as dopamine and serotonin that actively work to reduce stress levels, boost mood, decrease anxiety, and improve one's overall sense of wellness.

Establishing a regular workout schedule/routine, in addition to offering these mental health benefits, also adds a layer of regularity and predictability that can help ease stress and anxiety as well.

Eat Healthy

Healthy eating is a foundational element of staying well when you feel like you are out of control of your life. Having a well-rounded diet that consists of the proper vitamins and nutrients can fuel our physical bodies and our minds to deal with challenging and unpredictable situations.



Certain foods are packed with antioxidants ingredients that boost mood and induce calm. Such items can include dark chocolate and chamomile.

Sleep Well

Getting adequate amounts of rest is crucial to coping when you feel life is out of control. A lack of sleep can exacerbate feelings of stress and anxiety by robbing our minds of critical time to repair and renew. As a result we can become more reactive, see impairments to our judgment, and experience heightened levels of stress and anxiety.

When we get adequate amounts of rest each night on the other hand, our brains are given the chance to repair and we can better reason and manage.

This puts us in a better position to deal with stressors and cope with difficult situations.



Conclusion

When life becomes unpredictable it can bring about intense feelings of losing control. When we aren't given the certainty or sense of finiteness we so often seek it can make us feel anxious, stressed, fearful and lead to a host of issues.

Mentally and emotionally we can become unstable, lose our ability to reason and rationalize, become paralyzed by fear, become more emotionally reactive, and even disengage with others and fall into depression and problematic behaviors.

Physically, health problems such as chronic pain, headaches/migraines, heart issues, blood pressure problems, and gastrointestinal issues can arise.

Thus, learning how to navigate times and situations that make us feel a loss of control becomes an essential skill for maintaining physical, mental, and emotional wellness. By implementing some or a combination of strategies listed above you can be primed to thrive instead of allowing stressful and uncertain situations to get the best of you.



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