

10 COPING STRATEGIES

For Trauma and
Traumatic Events

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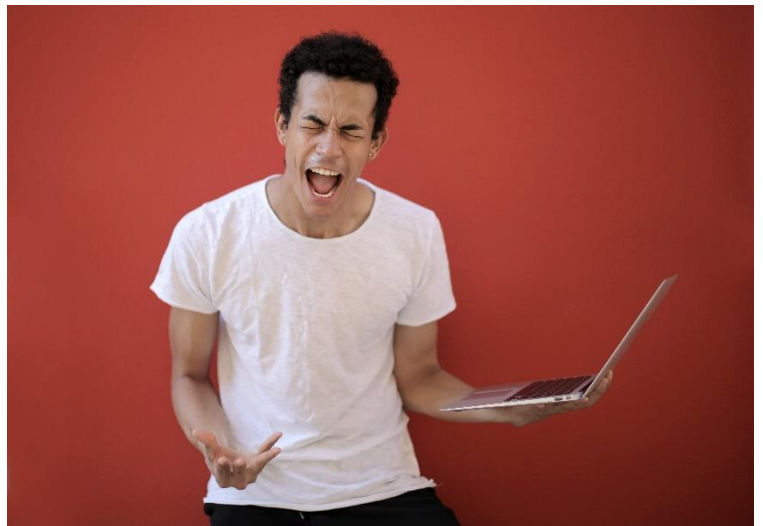
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Introduction

Will it never end?

It's a question we have all asked. A quick glance at the news is enough to stress out even the strongest people. Mass shootings. Terrorist attacks. Hate crimes. Natural disasters. Global pandemics. It's easy to see why we have grown accustomed to expecting the worst, which is why coping strategies are so important.

Trauma is inevitable. What isn't inevitable, however, is it knocking you down and preventing you from getting back up. How do you deal with it? Often, the trickiest part is understanding when you're experiencing a traumatic event.



It might not always be apparent and you may be overwhelmed by stress before you realize you have felt run down for so long you can't remember when it started. Sometimes, your body responds when your mind hasn't. You feel like you've finished a marathon. You realize you've had a headache for days.

Following a traumatic event or a major disaster, you will experience a range of emotions. No one can tell you the right way or the wrong way to feel. Your immediate emotional response is simply the way you feel. However, when you are faced with traumatic events or trauma, you need coping strategies to turn to.

While your emotional response is valid regardless of what it is, it isn't always a healthy emotion to dwell on and you need the skills to process those emotions. You need skills to manage emotions and the stress that comes with them.

The key to successfully managing trauma is to cope. You likely cannot change what has happened so it is down to you to channel emotion-focused coping mechanisms to process what has happened.



10 Coping Strategies For Trauma

Let's take a look at ten effective coping strategies you can use for relief.

Self-Care

This goes beyond taking a bubble bath to get some peace and quiet. Self-care includes eating healthily, limiting alcohol consumption, exercising regularly, and avoiding the misuse of drugs, all of which the CDC recommends. It can be as simple as stretching when you wake up, eating a healthy breakfast, meditating before work, and taking a walk after dinner. All of this can relieve stress. Some other great self-care activities include:

News Consumption

While it's important to pay attention to what's going on in the world and your community, you don't have to be connected 24/7. Think about how you consume the news. Do you watch the news on television? Is it on in the background as you do other tasks? Do you use social media to catch up on news or people's opinions on the news?

We seem to be caught in this loop of stressing out about the state of the world and making it worse by constantly reading about how awful everything is. Take a break! You're not going to miss much.

Sleep Well

The average adult needs at least seven hours of sleep each night. How much sleep do you get? It's particularly difficult to get a good night's sleep



when you're stressed out of your mind. However, there are steps you can take to make life a little bit easier for yourself. So, stop consuming caffeine after 2 pm, avoid screens at least an hour before bed, and try a deep breathing technique. Don't force yourself to bed if you don't feel tired, try a relaxing activity to ease you into sleep-mode. You may want to journal to get rid of all the stressful thoughts roiling around in your head.

Calming Techniques

Calming techniques are an ideal method of managing the stress that comes with experiencing trauma. There are plenty to choose from, including activities *you* may find calming that do not typically fall under the umbrella of calming techniques. Activities such as knitting, puzzles, chess, etc.



Deep Breathing

A lot of us underestimate the power of breathing and that's because we aren't doing it properly! Your diaphragm has a bigger job to do breathing than you realize because when you inhale you should feel your belly expand.

Does it? If not, you're a shallow breather. Don't worry, that's not an insult. Over time, we forget how to breathe properly and those shallow breaths increase your stress and anxiety levels. A simple breathing exercise should help you get back on track.

Mindfulness

Just as deep breathing helps manage stress, so does mindfulness. It has existed almost as long as humanity, but it's only in recent years mental health professionals have realized just how powerful a tool it can be.

It's all about rooting yourself in the moment and being aware and grounded. Often, we get caught up in our heads and allow anxiety and stress to take over. Mindfulness helps you get that habit under control.

Meditation

Meditation is another grounding calming technique that seeks to bring your attention to the moment at hand. It's a simple practice and five minutes is more than enough to help you relieve some of the stress you may be under as a result of trauma or a traumatic event.

Muscle Relaxation

Are you familiar with progressive muscle relaxation? If not, it might be time to get acquainted. It's simple tensing and then relaxing each muscle group throughout your body, taking each in turn. As you tense each muscle group you will notice specific areas of tension, but the relaxation part signals to those muscles it's time to relax. This is an exercise you can do at any time, but it's particularly useful before bed.

Self-Monitoring

If you're looking for a useful way to get to grips with the stress and anxiety that trauma tends to bring, then self-monitoring is an excellent habit to get on board with. Often, you live your life and go about your day without paying much attention to what's going on around you.

While that has its uses in certain situations when you are dealing with trauma it's important to pay attention to your thoughts and emotions to make them more manageable.

You can't address the emotions until you are more aware of the trauma or event that is causing these negative emotions. Self-monitoring is simply a way of increasing your awareness.

Social Support

Repeatedly, experts have found that social support is a crucial component in dealing with the negative emotions and effects of trauma. Whether you're dealing with PTSD or a single traumatic event that you're dealing with at the present, having trustworthy people in your life that you can talk to is important. Not only does it help you process your emotions and the situation it's also an important part of the emotional validation process.



One of the reasons that talking works so well when dealing with trauma is because you take away its power. When it lives in your mind and only within yourself it can become overwhelming but talking about the trauma and your feelings and thoughts around it lessens its power over you, it makes it much less impactful.

If your social support structure doesn't feel sufficient, then it may be an indication you need further help. You may want to consider speaking to a medical professional for therapy or other solutions.

For some, this may feel like a failure. However, by taking steps to seek professional help you are taking a problem-focused approach to take an emotion-focused step. This is a great example of how the two can combine for best results (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5693481/>).

Distractions

Typically, distraction falls under the avoidance-focused coping strategy. In normal circumstances, this is considered a negative approach. Generally speaking, this is because it only delays the inevitable.

While you put off dealing with whatever it is you still experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety. However, in some cases, focusing on a strong emotion can make you feel entirely out of control.

When you're dealing with particularly strong emotions a short distraction may provide you with some much-needed relief. For example, if you have lost a loved one or experienced a breakup, then short bursts of distraction may give you exactly what you need in that moment. The key is to choose healthy distractions versus alcohol, etc.

Healthy Distractions Include:

- Reading
- Work
- Hobbies
- A home project
- Writing
- Helping someone
- Any activity that allows you to submerge yourself and get lost in it

Self-Soothing

With trauma comes a wave of anxiety and stress. The most difficult task we face when dealing with a traumatic event is the complicated feelings that arise.

Social support is one of the most effective ways we have to improve our mood and process the emotions we are experiencing. However, self-soothing also serves an important purpose. Particularly when you do not have a strong social network to turn to.

You may hear the term self-soothing and immediately think of the parenting technique that suggests babies should be left to cry it out until they find their thumb to suck on. Thumb sucking, nail-biting, leg shaking, finger tapping, etc.

are all examples of self-soothing. Though, they might not be the greatest of options.

What *is* a good way to self-soothe, however, is engaging each of your five senses to ground yourself. Name something you can see, name a thing you can smell, name a thing you can hear, name a thing you can taste, and finally, something you can touch.

You can take it further by engaging your five senses in relaxing activities:

- Bubble baths (feel)
- Herbal teas (taste)
- Aromatherapy (smell)
- Listening to your favorite band (hear)
- Watching a sitcom (sight)



Expressive Writing

A journal is an excellent way to express your feelings, work through your thoughts, and find a way to cope with the emotions you are experiencing. It can help improve both your psychological and physical health.

Often, expressive writing is a technique recommended to those living with PTSD



(<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/writing-about-emotions-may-ease-stress-and-trauma>). Why? It helps you move beyond the trauma and improve your coping skills to boot. It's also an excellent way to reduce the tension and anger you may feel following trauma.

A Support Group

This is not the same as the social support mentioned earlier. In our earlier point, we discussed the importance of reaching out to people you trust to help process your emotions. However, in this case, we are speaking specifically about a support group of people who have experienced trauma similar to your own.

For example, if your trauma has stemmed from a life-changing medical diagnosis, then a support group of people who have also received the same diagnosis can help you process this change to your life.

If you lost a loved one, then a support group for people who have lost someone will help you share your thoughts and emotions and provide you with advice from people who are going through the same situation.

Behavioral Activation

Typically, problem-focused coping strategies are all about taking action. You experience trauma, you know what has caused it, and you can change or influence the situation so you take steps to do so. Unfortunately, with trauma and the anxiety it creates, avoidance is easy. It seems as though it's the best way to deal with the situation because by avoiding it or running away you get brief relief. It's just that, though, the relief is ever so *brief*.

By avoiding it you are holding yourself back. It will be impossible to live a rewarding, meaningful life as long as you avoid dealing with the trauma you have experienced.

Behavioral activation is a positive action you can take to tackle your trauma head-on. Typically, it's a CBT approach to help people manage depression and anxiety. However, since people dealing with trauma often experience anxiety, which can trigger depression, it's a useful tool.

The idea behind it is depressive people often withdraw, avoid, and isolate themselves and are therefore less active. It starts with paying attention to when your mood dips or stress levels are at their highest point and what you're doing when it overwhelms you.

Then, you use that information to plan physical activities or social situations to help you combat those overwhelming feelings of stress or mood swings that you know will come. Often, we engage in patterns of behavior and you can manage them more effectively when you are aware of what's going on.

One Day At A Time

One step. One day. When you are trying to process trauma, your mind may feel as though it's spinning out of control. It's difficult to imagine your future now that this trauma has changed everything. It's difficult to focus on anything because of the stream of negative emotions you are trying to process.



No one said life would be easy, but who knew how hard it could get. As alone as you may feel, it's important to know that you're not. You're not alone and you're under no pressure to move faster than you can.

Take it easy, slow it all down, and remember you can only take one step at a time and you can only live one day at a time. Take today for today and leave the worries of tomorrow for tomorrow.

For now, focus on what you can do *right now*, whether it's preparing a healthy meal to enjoy as a family or going for a long walk in nature. There's something about getting outside in the fresh air that helps fight stress.

If the weather prevents you from getting out, opt for some easy indoor exercise to get your blood pumping and boost your mood. Remember, your body is sending you signals and you have to pay attention to what it's telling you. Know when rest and recovery are important and when your body tells you to rest make sure you listen.

Summary

Ultimately, the coping strategy that is most effective for you will depend on your personality, your circumstances, and the trauma that you have experienced. You may find that one approach is sufficient, but if you're like the majority of people, then you will need a multi-pronged approach.

Experiment with different strategies for different situations until you know which tools work best for which job.

It starts with determining whether it's a situation you can change/influence or not. Once you have the answer to that, you can proceed with which focused approach is more appropriate. If you can change the problem, then a problem-focused coping strategy should take the lead.



If you cannot change the problem or even influence it, then an emotion-focused coping strategy is a more suitable approach. However, there are plenty of situations where you can effectively manage the stress and emotions caused by trauma through a combination approach.

Trauma can be so severe that it requires professional help. See a qualified mental health professional for an evaluation. Huge strides have been made in the field of trauma and PTSD recovery.

It's all about knowing yourself and understanding the emotions you are going through. Most importantly, give yourself the time and space you need to heal.