

## Coping For Recovery



### Coping is anything you do to get you through the moment.

Some coping strategies can seem to help in the moment but set us up to feel bad later and some coping strategies have negative effects when they are used too often, like suppression (trying not to feel it/think it/show it) or avoidance (staying away from certain things) or withdrawal (keeping to yourself). These coping strategies are unhelpful in the long-term because they limit us; they stop us from learning what we can do & are capable of; they stop us from connecting with people & make us closed systems.

Other coping strategies have positive or neutral effects on us in the long-term. These strategies help us improve the moment and at the same time allow us to engage with a life that enriches us. The key to effective coping is having different tools for different moments.

### Categories of Coping

There are four kinds of positive coping strategy. We call these: Expression & Support, Mindful Distraction, Engagement and Self-Soothing. Each category has techniques that work via thoughts, behaviour & physical responses to change the way you feel, give you space before responding to things and build resiliency to distress. Coping is vital no matter what your situation, but there's no substitute for building yourself a safe and healthy environment to live within. If there are aspects of your life you genuinely do not like, we suggest accessing some of the support out there to help you change it.

### Expression & Support

→ These two go together because you can't access support without some form of effective expression. Both are vital to wellbeing, even though they are difficult at times.

→ You can express yourself &/or get support with:

- » **Mind** – slowly observe & describe to yourself what is happening, have imaginary conversations with reassuring people, tell yourself how you feel and then encourage yourself through, imagine what your support person would say to you right now ...
- » **Behaviour** – talk about your day, write a journal, write letters to imaginary people, create art to suit your mood, ask for help, tell someone what is bothering you, call a helpline, sing, use The Voice Box, keep a record of positive experiences and thoughts that you want to remember, be honest when someone you can trust asks you how you are, write poetry, call an old friend and see what they've been up to...
- » **Physical responses** – make eye-contact, allow people to read your facial expressions, dance/jump/shake it out, go for a run, play sport with someone, laugh, smile, cry, ask a friend or family member if you can come over for a hug, do a haka (probably not in public) ...
- » **Note: Expression reduces physical stress responses & number of distressing thoughts.**



## Mindful Distraction

- Mindful distraction is using your awareness to turn your attention away from *unhelpful* thoughts. It doesn't mean that we try to push distressing thoughts away, it means that we let them come and go without judgement, and we then bring our minds back to the task at hand. Thinking over the same things for long periods is called 'rumination' and it is this kind of unhelpful thinking that mindful distraction is good for.
- You can distract yourself via:
  - » **Mind** – observe & describe other areas of the environment or the situation at hand, see if you can find any evidence for the *opposite* of what has been distressing you, try to remember a song you used to enjoy singing, make yourself mindfully aware of the colours and textures in your surroundings...
  - » **Behaviour** – engage yourself in an activity, wash the dishes, clean the bathroom, go for a walk, read a magazine, write a short story about something totally made up, paint a picture, talk to someone else about their day, call someone up and see if they need help with anything, read random articles on Wikipedia, do a crossword, look at old photos, make a collage, do colouring in, visualise something, make up a story in your head about a stranger in the room ...
  - » **Physical responses** – focus your mind on a breathing exercise, go to the gym, try to learn a dance routine, do a yoga class, change your posture, hold a piece of ice ...

## Self-Soothing

- Self-soothing is treating yourself as you would a loved friend in times of distress. Self-soothing is using your mind, your behaviour, your body and your environment to give you comfort and create positive emotions. Self-soothing is crucial, not only does it repair our mood in the moment, it also helps us to learn how to value, accept and respect ourselves.
- You can self-soothe via
  - » **Mind** – tell yourself *it will be okay, I can handle whatever comes my way*, visualise soothing scenes; imagine ripples in a lake, look for evidence that soothes your fears, imagine you are floating down a slow river in the sun, list in your head all of the things you know how to do, imagine things turning out how you'd like them to and what you could do to make that happen, put yourself in someone else's shoes and imagine how they would see the situation ...
  - » **Behaviour** – have a bath or shower, go outside and notice the light, get a cheap 10 minute massage at a mall, cook and eat your favourite meal (invite someone to eat it with you & it becomes engagement, support & maybe even expression too), go to a pet shop, go to the ocean, go outside and look at the horizon, visit a friend to see a friendly face, get clear on what you need/want to do, ask someone you trust for advice, watch or read something funny, take some time out, have a power nap ...
  - » **Physical Responses** – breathe deeply and slowly, have a chamomile tea, splash water on your face, feel the wind on your face, go for a gentle walk, have a swing at the park, do laughing yoga, stretch, sing along to the radio (singing changes the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in your blood and can create a sense of euphoria), smile genuinely at yourself in the mirror (seeing a smile releases neurotransmitters) ...



## Engagement

- Engagement builds your resilience to stress and distress by giving you opportunity for learning, achievement, connection, friendship & resources. Engagement is connecting with our environments and our internal responses so we can approach and manage our experiences.
- You can engage with wellbeing via
  - » **Mind** – make yourself present in the moment by observing & describing what’s happening now, set yourself goals, plan for your goals, inform yourself, notice every time something goes well ...
  - » **Behaviour** – accept invitations, join a club, look at people, make eye contact, do a course, go to an open mic night, volunteer at your local theatre group, write a list of things you’ve always wanted to do and then do one, go to a counsellor or therapist, get help from a peer support worker, visit the library, find out more about something you are interested in, connect with an online group of people who share one of your interests, join a support group, invite some people over to cook dinner together or play board-games, learn a language, spend time in nature, set goals
  - » **Physical responses** – eat 5 servings of fruit & vegies every day, do a breathing exercise every day, spend time meditating regularly, exercise for 30 minutes every day, get 6-8 hours of sleep every night, ensure your thyroid is operating properly, get regular physical health checks, make yourself available for people to make eye contact with, see a naturopath or homeopath, seek advice from a nutritionist ...

## Useful Tips

- **Be flexible and be creative.** Give things a chance – if these are new to you, then they probably won’t work until you’ve practiced them quite a few times and have become comfortable with them. When you notice you are feeling stressed, pressed or distressed, take a moment to express, get support, mindfully distract, soothe or engage yourself, in order to improve your moment. It can hard to change such automatic behaviour as the way we cope, so you may want some support. Be prepared to adapt things to suit your preferences, you’re in charge, this is *your* exploration of what works for you.



**The Coping Kete** is an Engage Aotearoa blog where a new strategy from the Engage Support Group’s ever-evolving “Coping Kete” is posted every week. You can sign on for updates and receive a new strategy in your email inbox to try out every week. When incorporating a new strategy, we recommend putting aside a few minutes every morning to practice it at first, regardless of how you feel. When you start to feel bad, it will become even harder to implement the strategy if it is still unfamiliar to you & we’re always in favour of making things easier on ourselves! **Go to: [www.engagenz.co.nz](http://www.engagenz.co.nz)**