

COPING SKILLS HANDBOOK



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PREFACE

Coping skills are the tools, techniques, and abilities people use to help them manage life's problems and conflicts. Coping skills can be healthy and productive, or unhealthy and unproductive. There are three basic categories of coping skills: emotional, behavioral, and cognitive.

In my counseling practice, when I ask people how they cope with life stressors, most people tell me what they do to relax. Examples I hear are: I work out, I go for a walk, I talk to a friend, I pet my dog, I listen to music, I take a bath, I drink alcohol, I eat, I watch t.v., I cut myself, I have sex. Some of these examples are healthy and productive and some are not, but they are all one type of coping - emotional coping. People often do not consider that coping encompasses more than just learning to relax. Though emotional coping is an essential part of coping, my hope with this handbook is to teach people that effective coping includes behavioral and cognitive skills, as well.

This handbook is quick reference guide and is not intended to be used in place of therapy or working with a professional in the field of mental health. Sometimes, the struggles people encounter seem overwhelming and are highly disruptive to their lives, in which case, it would be recommended such people seek the assistance of a mental health professional to help guide them through the process.

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EMOTIONAL COPING

Emotional Coping Defined

Emotional coping refers to your ability to calm your body's physiological response to stressors and manage feelings. To do this, it is first necessary to develop awareness of your body's physiological responses, and then implement the emotional coping techniques which calm the nervous system. The focus of emotional coping is on what you need to do to calm physiological arousal, so that you can feel better in the moment, return the body to a state of calm, and respond in a rational, productive manner. Understand, emotional coping does not solve problems, resolve conflicts, or address the root cause of why you are feeling what you are feeling, its only goal is to return the body to a state of calm.

Examples of Emotional Coping Techniques

Some examples of healthy emotional coping techniques are breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness exercises, physical exercise, reading, art, music, praying, venting to someone like a pastor, therapist, or friend. Some examples of unhealthy emotional coping are using drugs or alcohol and engaging in self-destructive or self-injurious behaviors, like cutting oneself or over-eating.

Overview of Emotions and Feelings

When your body is triggered by a stressor, there is a chemical response (emotion), you then react consciously to that emotion (feeling), and then you may be driven to respond through action (behavior) ([Hampton, 2015](#)). Some people are very insightful and are aware of their emotions, feelings, and behaviors, while others struggle to recognize their emotions, identify feelings, and be mindful of their behaviors.

Stressors can be anything (physical or psychological) that challenge the body to react in some way. Examples of stressors could be: a drop in blood sugar level, not getting enough sleep, being physically injured, being wronged, being cut off in traffic, having a fight with your spouse, having a disagreement with your boss, remembering something traumatic, to name a few.

Emotions are the surge of chemicals that get released in the body in response to a perceived stressor. Emotions are not produced consciously and they dissipate within seconds.

Feelings are your conscious interpretation of your emotions. Feelings are the meaning you assign to your emotions; they refer to the state of mind that you attribute to your emotions as you integrate, interpret, and process them. Feelings last longer than emotions.

Two renowned psychologists in the study of emotions are Paul Ekman ([Paul Ekman Group website, n.d.](#)) and Robert Plutchik. Paul Ekman suggested that there are six emotions that are universally experienced, and they are associated with specific facial expressions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise (["Emotions," n.d.](#)). On the other hand, Robert Plutchik identified eight

primary emotions which he outlined on his “Wheel of Emotions,” which are grouped on a scale of opposites: joy vs. sadness, anger vs. fear, trust vs. disgust, surprise vs. anticipation (“Wheel of Emotions,” n.d.).

Develop Awareness

Emotional coping begins with first being able to recognize when an emotional response has been triggered in your body. Emotions are like the warning lights that turn on in a car to alert the driver that something is wrong and requires attention. If the driver ignores the warning light, the driver may end up with a car out of gas, an overheated engine, or a dead battery. The same applies to us; if we ignore our emotions, i.e., our body’s system of alerting us that something requires our attention, we may end up in trouble. So, it is important to learn to recognize when our body is alerting us and what it is alerting us to do.

In my practice as a mental health counselor, some common issues clients come to therapy to get help with involve learning how to manage feelings of anxiety and anger. By the time clients come to therapy, they have realized that their feelings of anxiety and/or anger have become unmanageable and are causing problems in their lives which interfere with their relationships, work, and quality of life. Typically, what happens is something triggers an emotional reaction causing feelings of anxiety or anger, which then motivates a person to act. The problem is, usually when a person acts in a state of anxiety or anger, that person will not make rational choices that are productive and the person might be driven to say or do things that create new problems. The challenge for such people is to learn to recognize the symptoms of emotional activation, so that they can intervene and calm the body’s physiological arousal prior to acting, so that they give themselves the best opportunity to respond productively. This is key to managing feelings of anxiety and anger.

Physiological Symptoms

Specifically, with regard to anxiety and anger, this process begins with understanding how the nervous system responds to stressors. Certain emotions, such as anger and fear (which can be experienced as a variety of feelings) trigger the activation of the fight or flight response and cause a release of adrenaline into our bloodstreams. The fight or flight response is the name given to the body’s physiological response to a perceived threat. The name comes from the notion that when confronted with a perceived threat, a person tends to respond in predictable ways: a person may confront the threat and “fight,” or a person may avoid the threat and “flee.” The fight or flight response can be activated when there is a real, physical threat of danger, or a psychological threat, such as betrayal. Once activated, the adrenaline has many effects on the body: it relaxes blood vessels in the skeletal muscles of the limbs increasing blood flow to prepare the body to fight or flee, it contracts blood vessels in the skin and promotes clotting to protect the body from injury, it releases glucose into the bloodstream providing a source of energy, it stimulates respiration increasing the amount of oxygen going back into the bloodstream. This process can be experienced as an array of symptoms: heart racing, blood pressure increases,

increased breathing, surge of energy, gastro-intestinal symptoms, sweating, shaking, muscle contractions, jaw clenching, pupils dilate, to name a few. If you learn to recognize these symptoms as they are happening, it can alert you that you need to intervene with emotional coping techniques to stop the activation of the nervous system and return the body to a state of calm. Once the body has returned to a state of calm, it can confront the stressor rationally and utilize behavioral and cognitive coping skills to address the cause of the stressor (Goldstein, 2009).

Implement Emotional Coping Techniques

Having awareness of your body's physiological response to stressors is necessary, but it is not enough. It is also necessary to have the requisite tools to help you return your body to a state of calm after it has been triggered. Not all of the following emotional coping techniques will have the same effect on everyone, so it is important that you try each of them to see what works best for you. It is always good to have several tools in your toolbox, so that you have access to the most effective tool in any given situation. For instance, some people like to use physical exercise as a means to de-stress and calm the body, but physical exercise may not always be feasible, such as when you are in the middle of a mediation and your ex says something that makes you angry. In moments like that, it is important to have a tool that you can use right there, in the middle of the mediation.

Emotional coping techniques can be anything you use that helps to calm the body. The following are different types of emotional coping techniques:

1. Relaxation/Stress Reduction

- a) Deep diaphragmatic breathing exercises are an excellent way to return the body to a state of calm after the nervous system has been activated. There are many different types of these breathing exercises. Here is a link to a video published by Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates: [Click Here](#) (Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates, 2014). Here is a link to another video published by VoiceHacker: [Click Here](#) (Popcok, 2017).
- b) Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an exercise involving a series of controlled muscle contractions and relaxations. Here is a link published by Children's Mercy Hospital together with Bazillion Pictures, Inc.: [Click Here](#) (Connelly & Bickel, 2015).
- c) Imagery is something that may be done alone or in combination with breathing, meditation, prayer, and PMR. It involves using your imagination to conjure up stimuli that appeals to all the senses. It can include envisioning peaceful, calm images, relaxing sounds, imagining a pleasant smell, a soothing touch, or a delightful taste. There are a number of guided imagery videos available on the internet that can walk you through the experience. Here is a link to a guided meditation video for children

published by New Horizon Holistic Centre: [Click Here](#) (New Horizon Holistic Centre [New Horizon], 2017).

- d) Creative activities are another great way to relax. They can involve creating or listening to music, making art, or dancing.
- e) Self-care is important for health, in general, but many people also get a great sense of relaxation when they partake in such rituals as taking baths, getting facials, manicures, pedicures, getting their hair done, getting massages, acupuncture, etc..

2. Meditation/Prayer

- a) Meditation is an excellent way to calm the body and mind. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health (NCCIH)¹:
Meditation is a mind and body practice that has a long history of use for increasing calmness and physical relaxation, improving psychological balance, coping with illness, and enhancing overall health and well-being. Mind and body practices focus on the interactions among the brain, mind, body, and behavior. ([National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health \[NCCIH\], n.d., What is Meditation?](#)).

Dennis K. Chernin, M.D., M.P.H. ([Dennis Chernin website, n.d.](#))² in his book, “How to Meditate Using Chakras, Mantras, and Breath,” says that: Meditation is sustained and uninterrupted concentration that leads to a highly focused mind. Meditation begins with concentration, which helps make the mind steady. When prolonged concentration leads to the continuous flow of the mind towards one object, this becomes meditation. To maintain and deepen meditation, the mind must have something to focus on. These objects of concentration not only focus the mind but also have the inherent ability to lead the student to more expanded states of awareness. The objects typically used are sounds (mantras), visual images (yantras or chakras), light, breath, or specific types of prayer... There are several specific goals of meditation. The first is to liberate the mind from disturbing and distracting emotions, thoughts, and desires. The mind is transformed to a state of unrest and disharmony to a state of calmness and equilibrium. Another important goal of

¹ The NCCIH is the Federal Government’s lead agency for scientific research on the diverse medical and health care systems, practices, and products that are not generally considered part of conventional medicine.

² Dennis K. Chernin, M.D., M.P.H. teaches holistic and family medicine in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He serves as the medical director of two county health departments and is a lecturer at the University of Michigan Medical School in the Complementary and Alternative Medicine program. He has been actively practicing and teaching meditation and breathing techniques for forty years.

meditation is to bring the unconscious mind into conscious awareness in order to gain greater control over thought processes and emotions. The ultimate goal is to attain expanded states of consciousness in which we not only have increased awareness of previously unconscious thoughts and feelings, but also awareness of more subtle and universal principles, and comprehension of the world in a more complex and integrated way. In these states we can experiences great joy and inner peace.

(Chernin, 2002, p. 19). The following is an example of a script for a guided meditation:

For the next few minutes, I'm going to take you through some breathing exercises and a guided meditation. Sit back or lay down in a comfortable position. Just notice your breath. Close your eyes. Begin to relax your muscles and allow yourself to become heavy. Start to slow your breath. On your next inhale, slowly draw the air in through your nose and slightly constrict the muscles at the top of your throat. This will allow you to control the air flow. As you slowly sip the air over the back of your throat, your breath will begin to sound like the ocean. As you exhale, keep the back of the throat slightly constricted and allow the air to slowly trickle out your throat and through your nose. Keeping your mouth closed, continue this ocean breath. Begin to visualize yourself in a peaceful environment. Or, maybe you can visualize the molecules of air traveling through your body as the blood carries the fresh oxygen from your lungs to your heart. On your next inhale, slowly draw the air in for a count of 3 - 1...2...3. Exhale for a count of 3 - 3...2...1. Again inhale 1...2...3. Exhale 3...2...1. Continue for a few breaths on your own. You may notice that your mind begins to wander. If it does, that's ok. Acknowledge your thought and then allow it to float past you like a wispy cloud. Return your focus to your breath. Whenever your mind begins to wander, just return your focus to your breath. Perhaps you can set an intention or focus on something you wish to manifest. Now try to visualize what you are focused on. See if you can lengthen your exhale to a count of 6. At the top of your inhale, slowly release your breath and allow it to naturally escape until you feel there is no more air left, then gently constrict your abdominal muscles and squeeze out the remaining stale air. On your next inhale, try to lengthen your count to 4. Just when you think you have filled your lungs completely, see if you can sip in just a little more air. Maybe, at the top of the inhale you can practice retaining the breath for 3 counts before exhaling. Maybe, at the bottom of the exhale you practice holding your breath for 3 counts before inhaling. Continue this rhythm on your own. As you inhale, imagine filling your lungs completely with fresh air full of

oxygen. And, as you exhale try to squeeze out every last drop of stale air. Notice your chest rising as you inhale and falling as you exhale. Relax your shoulders. If you still notice any areas of tension or pain in your body, draw the air into those areas. As you exhale, letting go of any last bit of tension you might be holding onto. Now bring your awareness back to your body. Start to wiggle your fingers and your toes. Circle your ankles, your wrists. Take a big inhale and exhale with an audible sigh out your mouth. Raise your arms over your head and stretch. If you have been laying down, roll to your right side in the fetal position and take a few breaths here. When you are ready push yourself up to a seated position, keeping your eyes closed. Take a few breaths here and when you are ready, gently blink your eyes open.

(*Meditation*, 2014). To hear an audio version, [Click Here](#).

Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist and founder of Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute, coined the term "relaxation response" in the 1970s to describe the meditative process and the many health benefits associated with it. Here is a link of Dr. Benson demonstrating the technique: [Click Here](#). (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Public Health [MassDPH], 2016).

- b) Prayer has many of the same calming benefits as meditation. Many people describe prayer as a "conversation with God." Larry Culliford, in his article, "What is Prayer? Discovering that something really happens when we pray," explains that:

Prayer then involves foremost a particular kind of attention, a quiet inner-awareness of the flow of our emotions, thoughts, impulses, and the sense perceptions (like hearing, vision, smell and touch) that return our inward focus back outward to our surroundings in the ever-present here-and-now, and from there back into our thoughts and feelings as they gradually settle down. Finally, when the mind is still and clear, the spiritual connection appears as we become receptive to the creative insights, intuitions, promptings and guidance that seem gifted from heaven – answers to our unspoken prayers. The next step involves learning to carry over this exquisite spiritual sensitivity into everyday life.

(Culliford, 2016, p.1).

3. *Mindfulness*

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD³, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), explains, "[m]y working definition of mindfulness is the awareness that

³ Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD is a professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he was founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, and founder in 1979.

arises through paying attention on purpose in the present moment — non-judgmentally” (“About Jon Kabat-Zinn,” n.d., para. Jon Kabat-Zinn Video 1.2 Minutes). MBSR has been described as using traditional Buddhist principles of mindfulness and meditation with a modern, scientific-based perspective to create a flexible approach to reducing stress. Here is a link to a video of Dr. Kabat-Zinn explaining MBSR: [Click Here](#). (Omega Institute for Holistic Studies [Omega], 2011).

There are unlimited mindfulness exercises that can be found on the internet and they all focus on drawing your attention to becoming aware of everything in the present moment, simply by taking notice of it without judging it. Sometimes these are called “grounding” exercises because they are meant to ground you back into the present moment, rather than allowing your mind to wander into the past or future.

4. Physical

Physical exercise has many overall health benefits, but it can also be great way to reduce stress. Physical exercise stimulates the release of endorphins, which are chemicals in the brain responsible for feelings of euphoria; and, it can decrease cortisol levels, which are the stress hormones (Star, n.d.). The Mayo Clinic suggests that the process of physical movement combined with focused attention on an activity has a similar effect as meditation [Mayo Clinic Staff \[Mayo Clinic\], 2018](#)). Exercise has the added benefit of improving sleep, which can be disrupted when you are stressed (“Physical Activity Reduces Stress,” n.d.)⁴. According to Healthline, physical exercise improves the body’s ability to use oxygen and improves blood flow, which help improve brain function (Madell, n.d.).

⁴ Founded in 1979, ADAA is an international nonprofit membership organization dedicated to the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depression, OCD, PTSD, and co-occurring disorders through education, practice, and research.

BEHAVIORAL COPING

Behavioral Coping Defined

Behavioral coping skills are the tools, techniques, and skills you employ which help you fix problems and resolve conflicts. Unlike emotional coping, which only serves to calm physiological arousal, the purpose of behavioral coping is to empower you with the ability to exercise some control over a situation, so that you may improve the outcome. The key to using behavioral coping skills effectively is first being able to recognize what you do and do not have control over and what you have the power to change. Oftentimes, people frustrate themselves with trying to utilize behavioral coping techniques on situations which are beyond their control. In those cases, it would be more beneficial to use cognitive coping skills, because even if a person discovers he/she has no control over a given situation, he/she always has control over his/her own thoughts.

What is in My Control?

Short of using manipulation, violence, or coercive tactics, the only thing you have control over is yourself - your actions and your thoughts. You have the autonomy to make your own decisions, solve your own problems, and modify your thoughts to change your perspective, but in a healthy, egalitarian relationship, you do not have control over other people's thoughts or behaviors. You may have influence over other people's thoughts and actions, meaning, things you say or do may inspire another to think and/or act in a certain way, but ultimately, that person is responsible for his/her own thoughts and actions. An exception to this might be the control a parent exercises over his/her child or the control a caregiver may have over the infirm. Though, as any parent can attest, the control a parent has over a child is limited. Generally speaking, however, adults in healthy, egalitarian relationships do not have control over other autonomous adults.

Believing you have more control than you actually do can cause psychological problems and problems with your interpersonal relationships. A person who believes he/she has more control than he/she actually does might be burdened with feelings of anxiety and pressure to take on endless responsibilities, followed by feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction when all of those responsibilities are unable to be met. Also, people who believe they have more control than they actually do can struggle in their relationships because they may feel entitled to tell people what to do, how to solve their problems, or what to think.

Believing you have less control than you actually do can also cause psychological problems and problems with your interpersonal relationships. A person who believes he/she has less control than he/she actually does might feel disempowered to make choices at all because of a false belief that those choices are not his/hers to make. Such people may not assert themselves in their relationships and they are at risk of being taken advantage of because they are giving up their control to other people. Such people are prone to feeling hopeless and depressed and succumbing to abusive relationships.

So, the key to using behavioral coping skills effectively, is to first be able to accurately assess what control, if any, you have over the issue you are addressing. If you find yourself in a relationship where you are struggling to express yourself assertively, you can effectively use communication skills to help ensure you communicate your feelings, wants, and needs appropriately. If you have a problem that is yours to solve, you can effectively use problem-solving and decision-making skills to assist in the process. Likewise, if you find yourself in a conflict with another person, you can use negotiation and conflict-resolution skills to enhance your ability to navigate your side of the conversation. However, if you want to get someone else to do something, or think or feel a certain way, this is not in your control and behavioral coping skills will not help. Chances are if you desire to get someone else to do something, or think or feel a certain way, you will benefit from cognitive coping skills, so that you return your focus to what is in your control - your thoughts.

Implement Behavioral Coping Skills

Some examples of behavioral coping skills are: communication skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, and negotiation and conflict resolution skills.

1. Communication Skills

In this context, communication skills refer to the ability a person has to express their feelings, wants, and needs in a productive manner. There are different communication styles and patterns that people use, but not all of them are productive. To understand what makes communication productive, it is first important to describe the different ways communication can be expressed.

Direct vs. Indirect

Communication may be direct or indirect. Direct communication refers to whether the message is being delivered straight to whom the person it is intended, or if it is being delivered elsewhere. Whenever it is possible, the direct method is preferred.

- An example of direct communication is if mom has something to say to dad, she says it directly to him.
- Indirect communication would be if mom wants dad to know something, but she tells her child to convey the message to dad, rather than telling dad directly.

Clear vs. Unclear

Communication can also be clear or unclear. When communication is clear, the message the speaker wishes to convey is understood by the listener exactly as the speaker intended it. Clear communication expresses certain key elements: precisely how someone feels, why he/she feels that way, and what he/she wants/needs. When communication is unclear, one or all of these elements has not been properly expressed. Clear communication is the more productive method.

- An example of clear communication is, a mom says to her son, "I am disappointed to come home and find the dishes still in the

sink. I would like you to put them in the dishwasher now, please.”

- An example of unclear communication is, the same mom above says, “Geesh, does anyone else ever do anything around here?”

There are four basic communication styles people use: passive, aggressive, passive-aggressive, and assertive.

Passive Communication

Passive communication can sometimes mean no communication at all. It occurs when a person neglects to stand up for his/her own rights and fails to express his/her thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs. People who use passive communication may sound timid or apologetic and convey an underlying message that what they feel, think, or need is not ok, but what everyone else thinks, feels, or needs is ok.

- An example might be if a woman loaned her car to her boyfriend and he returned it with no gas. She is upset, but she says, “it’s ok.”

Aggressive Communication

If communication styles were on a continuum, aggressive would be at the opposite end of passive. People who use aggressive communication have the ability to stand up for their own rights and they have no problem expressing their thoughts, feelings, wants and needs, but they do it in a way that is inappropriate or disrespectful to others. Aggressive communication is violative and conveys a message of superiority; whatever the speaker thinks, feels, and needs is ok, but what everyone else thinks, feels, or needs is not ok. People who have an aggressive communication style use “you” statements, make accusations, and use subjective, superior or domineering language.

- Using the example above, the woman says, “you are so selfish, you should have put gas in my car before returning it.”

Passive-Aggressive Communication

Passive-aggressive communication is, as you might guess, a combination of passive and aggressive communication styles. It is passive because the speaker does not express his/her thoughts, feelings, wants/needs in a clear manner and the message is confusing. It is aggressive because it is disrespectful and vengeful, intended to even a score for a sense of feeling wronged by the person to whom the communication is directed. Passive-aggressive communication includes the use of sarcasm, teasing, ridicule, false praise, and insinuations.

- Using the same example, the woman say, “no worries, I have your credit card and I am going shopping,” suggesting that she will get her revenge by maxing out his card.

Assertive Communication

Assertive communication is the healthiest style of communication. Like with aggressive communication, people who speak assertively have the ability to stand up for a his/her rights, express his/her thoughts, feelings, wants/needs, but instead of being inappropriate and disrespectful, assertive people are appropriate and respectful. Assertive communication is honest, and uses objective words and “I” statements. The underlying message being conveyed in assertive communication is that what the speaker thinks, feels, wants/needs is ok, but also what others’ think, feel, want/need is ok too.

- Keeping with the same example, the woman says, “I am disappointed that you returned my car without gas and I would like for you to fill it up for me before I have to leave.”

With regard to communication skills, keep in mind that you only have control over your part of the conversation. You cannot control how the other person will respond and you cannot make the other person agree with you. You can only do your best to ensure that you did your part to express yourself effectively. If you speak directly, clearly, and assertively, you can have the satisfaction of knowing that you made your best effort to express yourself effectively, and that is all that is in your control.

2. Problem-Solving & Decision-Making Skills

Problem-solving is an analytic process which leads to decision-making abilities. ([Changeboard team \[Changeboard\], 2019](#)).

1. Step 1: Identify Problem

Problem-solving begins first, with clearly identifying the problem. This may seem like an obvious, simple step, but oftentimes, if the problem is not properly identified, it will be difficult to find the appropriate solution.

2. Step 2: Brainstorm Solutions

Once the problem has been identified, the next step is to brainstorm all possible solutions to the problem, without discarding any options, no matter how unrealistic the options may seem.

3. Step 3: Evaluate Solutions

This step involves identifying all the pros and cons for each possible solution and evaluating them to determine which solution is the best option.

4. Step 4: Implement Decision

Now that the best solution has been identified, decisions will be made to implement the solution and put it into action.

5. Step 5: Assessment

After the decision has been made and put into action, it is time to assess your choice and evaluate the efficacy of your decision. If it turns out that your decision is not yielding the desired outcomes, it may be necessary to start the process again, until you reach your desired results.

3. Conflict Resolution and Negotiation Skills

Conflict resolution occurs when two parties who disagree are able to settle their differences and find a solution to a disagreement. Part of being able to resolve conflicts depends on several abilities, including being able to manage your own feelings and negotiate successfully.

Managing feelings involves being able to recognize emotions, identify feelings, and control the expression of those emotions and feelings, so that you can express them in productive ways. Emotional coping skills would be appropriate to help accomplish these goals.

Negotiation is the process people go through to resolve differences and arrive at an agreement. The process involves the ability for each party to seek a solution that is in his/her best interests, while being able to be fair and respectful to each other, and each party being able to compromise to reach a mutually beneficial solution. ("[What is Negotiation?](#)," n.d.).

What is Negotiable?

Not all issues are negotiable. An issue is negotiable when both parties have the right to make a decision regarding the issue. Examples might be, deciding to which school the child will go or which doctor the child will see.

When only one person has the right to make a decision about the issue, it is not a negotiable issue. This goes back to being able to identify which issues are within your exclusive control and which are beyond your control. Examples might be deciding what clothes you will wear or which friends you will have. Issues which are only one party's right to decide may be open for a *discussion*, at which point the other person may be able to express his/her opinions or concerns, but ultimately the decision rests with one person alone.

Once both parties can agree that each party has a right to contribute to the decision-making and that a topic is, in fact, negotiable, then the following steps can be taken to assist in the negotiation process ("[What is Negotiation?](#)," n.d.):

Steps to Negotiation

1. *Being prepared:* Before people can even begin the process of negotiation, they must first be committed to a fair process. In preparation for being fair, the parties must be ready to:
 - Listen
 - Reach a mutually satisfying resolution
 - Hear things they disagree with or find painful without reacting abusively or defensively
 - Accept that something will change

2. *Setting some rules:* Begin by reviewing these rules and adding any that you mutually decide are important.
 - No yelling
 - No bringing up unrelated issues
 - No using threats or intimidation
 - No playing mind games
 - Is a time limit needed for this discussion?
 - Is a third-party needed to help with this discussion?

3. *Discussion, defining the problem:* What are we negotiating?
 - Is this issue negotiable?
 - Ask clarifying questions and listen to each other's position
 - How does each person experience and define the problem? (This will be different for each person.)
 - Who else is affected and how?

4. *Identifying goals:* Short and long-term goals should be identified.
 - *Short term:* Name the things that need to be included in an immediate solution.
 - *Long term:* Name the things that need to be included in a final solution.

5. *Finding solutions:* What would each person propose as an immediate and long-term solution that addresses the things each person has said needed to be considered:
 - Is compromise necessary or can both parties be satisfied?
 - If compromise is necessary, list several fair solutions.

6. *Reaching agreement and implementing course of action:*
 - Hopefully, an agreement can be reached and the plan can be put into action

7. *Failure to agree*

- If an agreement cannot be reached, it may be necessary to take a break, schedule a new meeting and try to negotiate at a later date, or seeking assistance of mediation services.

Time-Outs

A time-out is an announced break that you can take during an uncomfortable conflict or argument, so that you can calm your emotional response and feelings of anger. If you notice that you are in the middle of negotiation and tensions begin to rise, you can suggest you take a time-out and pause the negotiation process. During a time-out you may wish to remove yourself physically from the conflict and implement emotional coping techniques to calm the physiological arousal triggered by the tense negotiation.

Rules for Time-Outs

- Use time-outs to stop yourself from becoming abusive.
- Do not use them to avoid conflict or disagreement.
- Let the other party know you are taking a time-out, don't just leave.
- Use emotional coping techniques and positive self-talk during your time-outs.
- Do not drink alcohol or use drugs during your time-out.
- Seek positive support from others.
- Check with the other party before you return and make sure the other party is also ready to resume. If the other party is not ready to resume, respect that and do not return.
- If either party is not ready to resume, decide on a mutually agreeable time to resume

COGNITIVE COPING

Cognitive Coping Defined

Cognitive coping refers to the work you do to change the way you think, so that your thought processes are more productive⁵ and realistic. Cognitive coping involves being able to recognize and identify self-defeating automatic thoughts, core beliefs, and cognitive distortions; and then, implementing cognitive techniques to change those thoughts into productive thoughts. Cognitive coping also works very well when working to achieve acceptance about situations over which you have no control, like coming to terms with a loss. Examples of cognitive coping techniques are thought-stopping, reframing, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT).

Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity is the term which describes the theory that the brain can reorganize itself, grow new connections, and acquire new information throughout the entire lifespan (Shiel, Jr., n.d.). This is a fairly new discovery in science, as it was once believed that the brain stopped developing after childhood. What this means is, you *can* teach an old dog new tricks! The Sentis Brain Animation Series has a fun, simple video explaining the process, [Click Here](#). (Sentis, 2012).

Neuroplasticity is most commonly understood when looking at the recovery process of patients who have suffered strokes. When someone suffers a stroke, an area of the brain is deprived of blood and brain cells begin to die; and once they die, those cells do not grow back in those regions ("Heart Disease and Stroke," n.d.). Depending on the location and the intensity of the deprivation, permanent brain damage may occur which can manifest as a loss of mobility, language skills, memory, etc. - the effect depends on which area of the brain is damaged. Since the brain tends to compartmentalize learned functions to specific regions within the brain, when there has been damage to a specific region of the brain, the learned functions that were stored in that region can be lost. This is why someone who suffers a stroke may lose the ability to walk or talk - the area of the brain responsible for walking or talking has been so damaged that all learned information stored in that region is destroyed. What is fascinating is, because of neuroplasticity, patients who suffer debilitating strokes, i.e., who lose the ability to walk or talk, are able to re-learn those functions in different areas of the brain. Alila Medical Media published an interesting video explaining this process, [Click Here](#). (Alila Medical Media, 2018).

The learning of cognitive coping skills is dependent on the concept of neuroplasticity; "[n]europlasticity is a key element of mental health counseling. When people in therapy learn new coping skills, they are literally building the neural connections that promote resilience. As people learn new habits, their new synapses will replace the

⁵ In much of the literature on cognitive skills, words such as "positive" and "negative" are used regularly to describe thought patterns. This is a practice from which I refrain, since sometimes situations may not be "positive" and they are, in fact, "negative," and by forcing yourself to give a positive spin on a negative situation, I believe you are doing yourself a disservice because you may not be assessing the situation realistically and you may be instilling false hope. Therefore, you will find that I use the words "productive" or "unproductive" to describe thought patterns, rather than "negative" or "positive."

connections that prompted unhealthy behaviors and cognitive distortions” (“[Neuroplasticity](#),” n.d., para. [Neuroplasticity and Psychology](#)). Just like movement and language are learned behaviors which are stored in the brain, so too are thought processes. Thought processes can be reinforced and exercised like a muscle, until they become habitual; or they can be deprived and de-activated. Likewise, new thought processes can be learned and with training, can become stronger until they become the new standard way of thinking. Though a person may have spent decades thinking a certain way and developing a belief system, if that person wants to change the way he/she thinks, it is possible to do so. There is no such thing as, “this is who I am, I cannot change the way I think.” If a person is motivated to change an unproductive way of thinking, that person can.

Develop Awareness

What Am I Thinking?

The first step to using cognitive coping techniques is to become aware of your unproductive and distorted thought patterns. This begins with learning to identify self-defeating automatic thoughts and core beliefs and training yourself to recognize cognitive distortions.

Self-Defeating Thoughts and Core Beliefs

Self-defeating thoughts are those beliefs you have specifically about yourself that go against your own self-interest. They consist of unproductive views you have about yourself, your abilities, or your relationship to others. The thoughts you have (self-defeating or otherwise), combined with your value system, and outlook of the world comprise your personal belief system. [Click Here](#) to see a sample list of self-defeating thoughts ([Negative Cognitions](#), n.d.).

Core beliefs are those beliefs which are so deeply rooted that they become automatic and are accepted without challenge, as if they are proven facts. (“[What Are Core Beliefs?](#),” n.d.) Core beliefs effect how you see and interpret the world.

Having self-defeating thoughts and unproductive core beliefs can impact self-esteem, mood, behavior, and be at the root of many interpersonal conflicts. Learning to recognize such thought patterns and replacing them with more productive thought patterns can have the effect of improving self-esteem, mood, and interpersonal relationships.

Cognitive Distortions

Cognitive distortions are thought patterns that are not based in reality; they are thoughts which are skewed in favor of your own personal biases and core belief system. ([Grohol, 2016](#)) Cognitive distortions differ from self-defeating thoughts in that they are not necessarily about oneself and can be more global. Cognitive distortions are very common; even the most adept thinkers are guilty of engaging in thought distortions, from time to time. Since they are so common, there are several categories of predictable distorted cognitions which have been identified:

all or nothing thinking (black or white thinking), overgeneralization, labeling, mental filter (flaw fixation), catastrophizing, discounting the positive, jumping to conclusions, magnification, emotional reasoning (making feelings facts), “should” statements, personalization/blaming.

The goal is to learn to recognize when you have engaged in a thought distortion and use your critical thinking skills to challenge your belief by examining the evidence to determine if there is enough evidence to support your belief or not. If evidence supporting your belief is lacking, your belief can be discarded and replaced with a more realistic belief.

Types of Cognitive Distortions:

1. All or nothing thinking (black or white thinking): This distortion involves polarized thinking where you see a situation as completely one way or completely the other way with no room for middle ground. For example, if something is not perfect, it is total failure, as with a person on a diet who has a piece of chocolate and declares, “now my diet is totally ruined, I might as well eat the whole box of chocolates!”
2. Overgeneralization: This distortion occurs when you interrupt a single event as an enduring pattern, whereby you justify making a blanket claim based on your perception of the single event. Clues that you might be engaging in this distortion include the use of such words as “always, never, everyone, nobody, all, none.” For example, a girl has a disagreement with a friend at school and the girl proclaims, “everybody hates me!”
 - a. Labeling: This is an extreme form of overgeneralization. Here, instead of focusing a specific error, a person attaches a descriptor to the person who committed the error or the entire event where the error occurred. The descriptor is usually emotionally loaded. For example, a woman watches a news story about a man accused of sexual harassment and declares, “all men are pigs!”
3. Mental filter (flaw fixation): Here, a person only notices the flaws and filters out all else. The hyper focus on the flaws taints the overall perception, so that nothing else is noticed. For example, a man is at a performance review at work and the boss praises the man’s performance points out the many accomplishments the man has made, but the boss suggests that the man could improve one facet of his job. The man, seemingly ignores all the praise he received and instead only focuses on the suggestion he needs to make an improvement. The man goes home and tells his wife what happened and she congratulates him for the praise he received about his many accomplishments and he responds, “the boss said he thinks I need to improve.”

4. Discounting the positive: This is similar to the mental filter, but instead of focusing on the flaw, you discredit anything constructive about the experience. Consider the example above, the man might say to his wife, “yeah, but none of that matters, I was not good enough.”
5. Catastrophizing/Magnification: This occurs when a person interprets a minor setback to be much worse than it actually is. This involves a tendency to over-exaggerate or indulge in the “what ifs?” For example, a teenager wakes up with a pimple on her nose and exclaims, “this is the worst day ever!” Another example, a student studies hard for an exam, but is worried about failure and asks, “what if I get to the test and I freeze and cannot remember anything?”
6. Jumping to conclusions: This error occurs when you make assumptions without evidence to support them. There are two kinds:
 - a. Mind Reading: You assume that someone is reacting negatively towards you, with no evidence that supports your belief. For example, you walk into a room to greet someone and the person you are greeting has a scowl on his face. You assume that the man is scowling at you and believes he is mad at you, and you ask, “why are you mad at me?” (It turns out the man just had a disturbing phone call which he was still processing.)
 - b. Fortune-telling: In this distortion, you assume you know an outcome will be bad and you treat your prediction as a determined fact. For example, a woman asks her spouse to go to couples counseling to help with their relationship issues and the man says, “what’s the point in going? Counseling won’t help us.”
7. Emotional reasoning (making feelings facts): With this distortion, a person has a feeling and because the person feels that way, the person concludes that his/her perception must be true, because otherwise, the person would not feel that way. An example might be, a person feels guilty for telling a friend she could not take her to the airport because she has a doctor’s appointment, and suggests, “well, I must be a terrible person because I feel guilty for saying no.”
8. “Should, Must, Ought” statements: This is a common distortion where you set expectations on yourself, others, or the world, declaring that something is supposed to be a certain way. Examples: “I should not have dessert.” “He should apologize.” “This store should have more cashiers.”
9. Personalization & Blaming: This distortion occurs when a person incorrectly assigns responsibility to himself/herself or others. If a person accepts responsibility for something that is not his/her

responsibility, it is personalization. Blaming occurs when a person casts his/her own responsibility onto others.

1. An example of personalization is when an abused woman gets hit by her spouse she says, "it's my fault he punched me, I didn't have his dinner ready when he got home." The victim is assuming responsibility for the abuser's actions.
2. An example of blaming is if the abusive man says, "yeah, it's your fault you got hit, I warned you if you didn't have my dinner ready when I got home, you would get hit." Here, the abusive man is not taking responsibility for his abusive act.

Is This in My Control?

Another area of awareness has to do with being able to recognize what we have control over and what we do not have control over. For instance, we have the ability to control our own thoughts, but we do not always have control over situations. For some people who have experienced childhood abuse or trauma, or who suffer with mental health disorders, like schizophrenia, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder, it may feel impossible to control one's own thoughts. In rare cases, some people may require medications to help them quiet overwhelming symptoms and gain control of their minds. However, according to the theory of neuroplasticity, there is the possibility that one can train one's mind to disrupt old, habitual thought patterns and create new ones, even though it may be extremely challenging for some.

Unlike our thoughts, we do not always have control over situations, like how a problem should be solved or whether a relationship will succeed. Sometimes, problems are not ours to solve, and at best, we can only be responsible for our half of any relationship. It is for this reason that is important to learn to identify what is within one's control and what is not, because knowing whether something is within one's control will determine which coping skills would be the most effective to use in any given situation. For instance, if something is in your control and your efforts could improve the outcome, then you would use behavioral coping skills, but if something is not in your control, then you would use cognitive coping skills to help you achieve acceptance with the situation over which you have no control.

Consider the following example. Greg, a successful businessman, is a problem-solver; at work, whenever a problem comes his way, he tackles it and finds a solution immediately. However, Greg's wife, Janet, has a different approach to the way she solves problems; she likes to take her time, do research, get advice, and consider her options, before implementing a solution to a problem. Neither way is right or wrong, rather each is merely a different approach.

Janet has to make a decision about whether or not she wants to accept a different position at her work. Accepting the position would effect several factors in Janet's life, like which department she will work in, who she will associate with at work, and learning new tasks, none of which impact Greg in any way. Janet shares this with Greg, and that night at dinner, Greg begins reviewing the pros

and cons of each option, as he understands them. He starts suggesting what Janet *should* say to her boss and how to say it. He tells her what he would do, if it were him. Janet listens. The next day, Greg asks if she decided and she says she is still thinking about it. Greg tells her again what he think she *should* do. Janet tells Greg she is not ready to decide and she is still thinking. The next day Greg asks Janet again if she decided and she tells him she is still considering the offer. Greg gets frustrated that Janet has not followed his recommendations and made a decision yet. He complains that she takes too long to make decisions, and he no longer cares what she decides and tells her to do whatever she wants.

In the above example, Greg is trying to problem-solve (behavioral coping) Janet's problem, and because this is Janet's problem and he has no control over how she solves it, he become frustrated that she is not solving it the way he would. What would help Greg is if he understood that this is Janet's problem to solve, not his, and if Janet wants his advice, he is welcome to offer it, but that he has no control over how Janet decides to solve her problem. What he does have control over is his own thoughts. He could work on accepting the fact that Janet has autonomy to make her own decisions and she may do it in a way that is different from how he would do it. He could also learn to recognize the cognitive distortions that he is engaging in, which are causing him to feel frustrated, and he can implement reframing techniques to help him have more productive thoughts. Once Greg accepts that he does not have control over Janet's problem, he will be able to release himself from his personal attachment to the outcome, and realize that Janet's decision does not effect him one way or the other; plus, he will not feel frustrated because Janet is not doing what he wanted her to do.

Implement Cognitive Coping Techniques

Cognitive coping skills are thought exercises which focus on identifying flaws in your thought processes and correcting them. The exercises range in degree of difficulty and some may require the assistance of a trained mental health professional to execute effectively. By implementing cognitive coping skills, you may shed unproductive views you have about yourself, others, and/or the world, which may then effect your feelings and influence your behaviors and how you relate to others.

1. Thought-stopping

One of the simplest techniques is thought-stopping. This technique involves first being able to recognize the unproductive thought. Once you realize you have the unproductive thought you literally tell yourself to "stop" engaging in the thought. Some people say the word, "stop" aloud, some imagine hearing it spoken or imaging hearing another intrusive sound, like a buzzer. Others imagine the image of a stop sign. The point is to disrupt the process of reinforcing the neural connection by engaging in the thought, so that the neural connection weakens and eventually dies.

2. Reframing

Reframing is a technique in which an unproductive thought is replaced with a more realistic, productive thought. It is often likened to the ability to extract something useful from a seemingly useless situation, i.e., every cloud has a silver lining.

What I have noticed in my counseling practice is that reframing techniques are most effective when applied to general, unproductive thoughts about others or the world, rather than on self-defeating thoughts or core beliefs.

For example, you have been planning all week to go to the beach this weekend because you finally have some time off and wanted to get some sun, but when you wake up on Saturday morning there is a terrible thunderstorm and it is predicted to last all weekend. You say, “argh, my weekend is ruined!” This is an example of the distortion, catastrophizing. A friend challenges your thinking and points out that since the beach is no longer an option, it would be a good opportunity to go see that movie you said you wanted to see, but had no time to do so. Inspired by your friend, you reframe your thought, “ah, it’s ok, my weekend is not ruined. Now is the perfect time to go see that movie I have been wanting to see.”

Another example, a woman says to her spouse, “you *should* have known that your music was going to keep me up all night and you *should* have turned it off.” This is an example of the cognitive distortion, should statements. To challenge the woman’s belief that her spouse “should” have known what she wanted, her friend asks, “why do you think he should have known that? Did you ever tell him his music bothers you? Did you ever ask him if he would turn it off when you went to bed?” Often, people neglect to assert their needs and ask for what they want, but have an expectation that other people *should* just know what they want and do it without asking. The reframe here could be, “maybe it’s not fair for me to expect that he knows what I want without me telling him.”

Another example might be when a person is trying to cope with grief due to a loss and is struggling with acceptance. A grieving child might ask, “why did Auntie have to die/leave us? Life is not fair!” In this case, a parent may try to console the child by reframing those thoughts and suggest, “how lucky are we though, that we got to have all that wonderful time with Auntie?”

When it comes to self-defeating thoughts and core beliefs, reframing may not be impactful enough to sway a person from believing a self-defeating thought to believing a more realistic thought about oneself. Usually, changing self-defeating thinking and core beliefs requires more intense work.

Say for example, Susan says, “nobody loves me.” This is an example of the cognitive distortion, overgeneralization, but it is also self-defeating. Her friend challenges Susan’s claim and says, “that’s not true, you are my

best friend and I love you.” Susan may then be able to reframe her initial thought into something more realistic, like “well, at least *you* love me.” It is possible that Susan’s remark is an expression of a thought related to an isolated feeling because of something specific that recently happened in her life, but that she does not think or feel this way all the time. If that were the case, reframing may be all she needs to shake her out of a poor attitude. On the other hand, if Susan’s remark is more reflective of a pervasive, ongoing, core belief that she is unlovable, I would wonder if a simple reframing technique would be strong enough to convince Susan to shed her underlying belief.

Instead, consider Susan from the example above, if what she meant by “nobody loves me” is the core, self-defeating belief, “I am unloveable,” chances are her friend’s remark would not be enough to convince her otherwise. The belief, “I am unloveable,” represents a deeply-rooted concept of oneself. The belief that one is unloveable has global implications, in that a person who believes this would believe this all the time, in all relationships. To persuade Susan that she is lovable may first require identifying what it means to Susan to be lovable and what sorts of characteristics a lovable person might possess. Then, it might be helpful for Susan to do an inventory of her own characteristics to see if she possesses any of those characteristics she identifies with a lovable person. The process I am describing is part of REBT (see below) and would be a more powerful technique to use to try to change Susan’s self-defeating core belief than a simple reframing technique.

3. Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT)

The second example above where Susan is working through her self-defeating core belief, “I am unlovable,” is an example of how REBT works. REBT was developed by the renowned psychologist, Albert Ellis. It is based on the premise that irrational, self-defeating thoughts are what is responsible for the experience of painful or uncomfortable feelings, and that these thoughts and feelings are what motivate self-destructive behaviors (“REBT,” n.d). REBT focuses on helping a person to identify irrational, self-defeating thoughts and guiding the person through a process of disputing those thoughts in order to arrive at more realistic, productive thoughts. The goal is to disrupt a person’s habitual, irrational, and self-defeating outlook and create a new rational, productive belief system which, in turn, improves feelings and behaviors.

REBT involves a methodical approach to going through this process, commonly referred to as the ABCD Model. [Click Here](#) for a link to a video published by Therapist Aid which explains the process (Therapist Aid, 2014). These are the basic steps:

- A. Identify the **Activating Event**: This is the event that took place in the present that triggered a thought, feeling, and behavior.

- B. Identify the **Belief**: This is the irrational thought you have about the event which just took place. The key to this step is to find the underlying self-defeating thought that might be lurking beneath a more identifiable thought. A question I tend to ask in my practice to help people identify the irrational, self-defeating thought is, “what unproductive thought did this event make you think about yourself?”
- C. Identify the **Consequences**: The consequences refer to your resulting feelings and behaviors. How did you feel when this event happened and you thought what you thought? After thinking and feeling this way, what did you do?
- D. **Dispute** the belief: This is the part of the exercise which focuses on challenging your belief system. You ask yourself a series of questions to help you dispute your belief and find a more rational, productive belief to replace it with. If you did a convincing job here, you will find that you now have a different, more rational belief about the event. The goal is, once you can think more rationally about the event, your feelings and behaviors will improve.

There are many wonderful tools and worksheets available to assist with this exercise. [Click Here](#) to see a sample worksheet (*ABCD Model*, n.d).

The following is an example of how to apply the ABCD Model. A college student does not do as well on a test as she expected to do and upon receiving her grade, she exclaims, “I am so stupid!” She feels sad and embarrassed and decides to drop the course and avoid the professor.

- A. Activating event: receiving the undesired test result
- B. Belief: I am so stupid
- C. Consequences: feeling sad and avoiding the professor
- D. Dispute:
 - 1. What makes you think you’re stupid?
 - 2. What grade did you expect and why, and what did you get?
 - 3. Did you prepare for the test, i.e., study, sleep, eat?
 - 4. What does it mean to you to be stupid?
 - 5. What evidence is there that you fit the criteria of stupid you just described?
- E. Phase D could take time and you may not be convinced in one session of disputing the belief, but the point is to challenge the belief, examine the evidence, and see if there are alternate beliefs you could have which are more rational and realistic. Chances are, once you have a more realistic, rational belief about the activating event, your feelings will improve and you will have more productive behaviors.

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