

# Module 10:

## Coping strategies



### This module will:

- explain what coping strategies are
- help you think about how you already cope
- explain a number of coping strategies that you can use

**Authors: Caroline O'Connor, Kevin Duffy, Caroline Brilly.**

Edited by Caoimhe Black and Brian Fitzmaurice



## Plan for today's session

How was your week?

What would you like to talk about today?

## Evaluating today's session

Summary of what we talked about today

What will I do during the week?

How was today for me?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

---

## What do we mean by coping?

Coping is what we do to keep ourselves mentally and emotionally healthy when we are stressed. Everyone has their own way of coping (coping strategies). Sometimes they are **effective** and help us. Sometimes they are **ineffective** and don't help us.

## What are coping strategies?

Coping strategies are the behaviours, thoughts, and emotions that we use to adjust to the changes in our lives.

**Helpful coping strategies** can help us in lots of ways. For example, some people experience stress as pain or tension in their bodies. If they decide to exercise as a coping strategy, a few things can happen.

- They have a sense of achievement: I did something to help myself.
- They get time out from worry.
- They are likely to feel happier.

Helpful coping strategies often give us a different view of things that might help us begin to think of a solution to our problem or worry.

Unhelpful coping strategies can feel good but don't help us in the long term. They may even harm us. For example, some people drink to help them relax. This might work for a short time, but it does not help over time.

- They may feel more anxious, lose their motivation and lower their mood.
- The strategy can become a problem instead of a solution.

Unhelpful coping strategies can make us feel worse about ourselves and harm our relationships with others.

We might develop an unhelpful coping strategy because of how we think and feel about our experiences. We can also learn them from people around us.

Sometimes we use unhelpful coping strategies without knowing it. And sometimes a strategy that is effective in one situation is ineffective in another situation.

Here are some examples of helpful and unhelpful coping strategies that you may already know.

Helpful coping strategies	Unhelpful coping strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Humour</li><li>• Looking for support</li><li>• Relaxing</li><li>• Doing exercise and physical activity</li><li>• Changing your expectations</li></ul> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Avoiding or ignoring a problem</li><li>• Using alcohol or drugs</li><li>• Blaming yourself</li><li>• Forgetting about your strengths and focusing on your weaknesses</li></ul> 

In the rest of this module, we will look at helpful coping strategies in more detail.

**Activity:** Fill in the coping strategies worksheets.

- **What am I coping with every day?**
- **What sort of mental health experiences am I coping with?**
- **What coping strategies do I already use?**

.....

# What am I coping with every day?

 **Worksheet**

**My experiences**

**Everyday life**

**How I get on with other people**

**How I think about my mental health and how other people think about me**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# What sort of distressing experiences am I coping with?

## Worksheet

Where am I when my experiences are likely to happen?  
For example, am I inside or outside? Am I with people or alone?

What am I doing when my experiences happen?  
For example, am I out walking, in bed or thinking about past experiences?

Do I have my experiences when I am in a certain mood?  
For example, am I stressed, anxious or worried?

What do I tell myself about these experiences?  
For example, do I tell myself I shouldn't have them or that it means I am bad?

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

# What coping strategies do I already use?

See if you can identify the coping strategies you already use. Think of effective and ineffective strategies and write them here.

 **Worksheet**

Helpful coping strategies	Unhelpful coping strategies
	
<hr/> <b>My coping strategies that are effective sometimes but ineffective other times</b> <hr/>	

# Identifying and using helpful coping strategies

There are many helpful coping strategies you can use. This section gives you information about these strategies.

- Distracting yourself
- Talking to someone
- Accepting uncertainty
- Focusing
- Managing your mood to manage your experience
- Using positive affirmations
- Comforting yourself

## Distracting yourself

Distracting yourself from a voice or an unusual thought is not as easy as it sounds. It may take a while for you to find a way of distracting yourself that works. When you do, though, you have a way of coping better with your experiences.

Distracting yourself is unlikely to make the distressing experience go away completely. It might only help you for a short time. But distracting yourself is a step toward finding more ways to cope with your experiences. If you practice distracting yourself, you will find it helps.

Have you ever had a song in your head that you don't like? This is a good time to practice distracting yourself. You can hum or sing a song you like to distract yourself from the one you don't like. Most people find that this helps them forget about the song they don't like.

### Strategies for distracting yourself

- Watch TV, play a computer game, go to the cinema, do a puzzle or Sudoku
- Listen to music—try listening with and without headphones
- Read a magazine
- Talk to a family member or friend
- Attend a day course, book club or writing course
- Do a hobby such as painting, gardening, playing the piano or craft work
- Do something active: go for a walk, bike ride or a swim
- Pray or meditate
- Do yoga
- Have a warm bath

## Talking to someone

“A problem shared is a problem halved.” When you talk to someone about things, you are likely to improve your mood and gain hope that things can change for the better.

### Talking as stress relief

When you are stressed, talking to someone you trust can make you feel better. It is important to feel that you are heard, and a trusted person can provide us with reassurance and support.

Talking to someone can make you feel better even if you cannot change the situation.

### Talking as problem solving

Sometimes we need help solving a problem. You can ask someone you trust to help you think about your problem and how you can solve it. Two heads are often better than one.

### Talking to get a different perspective

Sometimes there is more than one way to look at your problem. Talking to someone else can help you understand this. Is there someone else who has had an experience like yours? How do they manage?

## Accepting uncertainty so you can stop worrying<sup>24</sup>

Many people do not like uncertainty. This causes them to avoid situations that they cannot predict or that seem uncertain.

If you hate uncertainty, then you may think worrying is useful. You may think that worrying:

- prepares you for the worst that might happen
- helps you predict life so that there are no nasty surprises
- helps you believe that you have more control and certainty in life

<sup>24</sup> This section is based on a handout from the Centre for Clinical Interventions, Western Australia. Get their handout here: <http://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/docs/Info-Accepting%20Uncertainty.pdf>

Try and think of a time when worrying has made something more certain or predictable for you. You will probably have trouble thinking of an example.

Like everyone else, you worry because you want to have control. But all you actually do is:

- think of the worst-case scenarios
- work yourself up
- make yourself feel bad
- stop yourself from taking action

Instead of worrying, it is better to learn to accept that things are uncertain. The worksheet **Learning to accept uncertainty** will help you start thinking about this.

You can also practise **mindfulness**. When we worry, we focus on the future. When we are mindful, we focus on the present and accept our current experience. These are the three basic steps to follow to help you be mindful and less stressed by uncertainty.

- **Be aware.** Start by noticing your breathing, and use this to remain in the present. What are you thinking now? What are you feeling in your body now? Acknowledge these thoughts and feelings. Think of yourself as a mountain, which is firm, strong and grounded.
- **Let go.** Say something to yourself to help you let go of the need for certainty. You can tell yourself something like, “I’m only thinking about how I need certainty. Just let it go.”
- **Be non-judgemental.** Be curious about your thoughts without judging them or trying to change them. Let them go by like a train passing through a station. Then focus on here and now. Focus on the sounds around you, how you feel, your breath or whatever task you are doing.

.....

# Learning to accept uncertainty

## Worksheet

What are the advantages of trying to be certain of everything?

What are the disadvantages of trying to be certain of everything?

When you are uncertain, do you predict something bad will happen?  
How often does your prediction come true?

Think of a situation where you are ok with uncertainty.  
What do you do that makes it ok?

Think of another situation where you are not ok with uncertainty.  
What can you do to make it ok?

Talk to your friends about how they cope with uncertainty. Ask them for some tips.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Calming yourself with breathing techniques<sup>25</sup>

The way we breathe can affect how we feel and how we deal with stress.

As you probably know, the air contains oxygen, and we need oxygen to live. When we breathe in, we take in the oxygen in the air. When we breathe out, we breathe out carbon dioxide, or CO<sub>2</sub>.

For our body to work properly, it must have a balance between oxygen and CO<sub>2</sub>. The way we breathe maintains this balance. If we breathe too much or too little, this balance is lost. When we breathe too much, we get too much oxygen. When we breathe too little, we don't get enough oxygen and too much CO<sub>2</sub>.

Breathing too little will decrease levels of oxygen and increase levels of CO<sub>2</sub>. The appropriate rate of breathing when calm and relaxed is around 10 - 14 breaths per minute. How does this compare to your rate of breathing?

## What is your breathing rate?

When we are calm and relaxed, we should take between 10 and 14 breaths in a minute.

To find out how quickly you breathe, count your breaths for one minute. One breath in and one breath out counts as one breath.

Our breathing is usually automatic – we breathe without having to think about what to do. But we can also control our breathing. For example, it is easy to hold our breath when we swim underwater, and we speed up our breath when we blow up balloons.

Our mood and stress can also change our breathing. And we can learn ways to change our breathing. This can help if we experience symptoms such as anxiety.

## What happens if I breathe too much?

If we breathe too much or too quickly, we **overbreathe** or **hyperventilate**.

When this happens, the balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide in our bodies changes. This change creates unpleasant symptoms.

---

<sup>25</sup> This material has been adapted from **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Psychotic Symptoms: A Therapist's Manual**.



These are some of the symptoms of overbreathing or hyperventilating.

- If there **isn't enough oxygen to the brain**, we may become dizzy, light headed, confused, breathless, have blurred vision, or have feelings of unreality.
- If there **isn't enough oxygen to some parts of the body**, we may have an increased heart rate as our heart works harder to pump blood, tingling and numbness in our hands and feet, cold, clammy hand or muscle stiffness.
- We can be tired and exhausted. This is because overbreathing for a long time requires more energy and effort – it's like you've been constantly walking uphill!
- We can get hot, flushed and sweaty.
- Our chests may be tight or we may have chest pains because we are breathing from our chests, not our diaphragms (the large muscle underneath the lungs).
- We sigh or yawn a lot.

While overbreathing can produce lots of symptoms associated with anxiety, these changes are not harmful. In fact, hyperventilation is sometimes used as a medical test.

When you overbreathe, you might feel like you are choking or smothering, as if you are not getting enough oxygen. In fact, you're getting too much oxygen.

Overbreathing is part of your body's response to emergencies. If you have an emergency, you wouldn't be overbreathing even if your breathing rate increases. This is because the extra oxygen you take in gets used for the emergency.

People sometimes worry that they might collapse or faint if they overbreathe for too long. Fainting almost never occurs because of overbreathing. When someone does faint from overbreathing, they usually have a history of fainting because some other condition makes them more likely to faint.

Sometimes you might have the symptoms of overbreathing even though you don't feel like you are overbreathing. In fact, you probably are overbreathing, but just a little. If this happens, say, for a whole day, you might think you're fine. But when you sign, yawn or have an anxious thought, suddenly you might become light headed, have a pounding head, or develop a panic attack.



## Gaining control of your breathing

Gaining control of your breathing is an important skill to develop. When you learn how to do this, you need to practise regularly. This is because it is a skill, and if you don't practice it will be more difficult to do it correctly. Controlling your breathing will help you:

- reduce some of the physical effects of overbreathing and
- use your breathe to help you relax

### How to practise controlling your breath

- Start in a safe situation when you do not feel stressed.
- Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on a bed.
- Through your nose, breathe in for 4 seconds.
- Hold your breath for 2 seconds.
- Through your nose, breathe out for 6 seconds.

It is best to breathe through your nose. You can control your breath better this way. But if you have to, breathe through your mouth.

Practise every day. Learning to control your breath is like playing a sport or a musical instrument. You need to practise to get good at it.

## Calming yourself with muscle relaxation

Learning to relax your muscles will help you relax when you need to wherever you are. You should practice every day.

### How to practise relaxing your muscles

- Start in a safe situation when you do not feel stressed.
- If your clothes are tight, loosen them.
- Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on a bed. Do not cross your arms or legs or support one body part with another. For example, don't support your head with your hands.
- Following the order listed below and tighten (or tense) your muscles.
  - Tighten the muscles so they feel stiff.
  - Hold the tightness for 5–6 seconds.
  - Release the muscles and, as you do, say the word 'relax'.

Observe how you feel as you relax.

- Wait 10 seconds, then move on to the next muscle group.
- When you can tighten and relax each muscle group, practice with your entire body.
- When your entire body is tense, you are like a robot. You are stiff and nothing is moving.
- When you relax, you are like a rag doll with your muscles hanging down.

Practise every day. Learning to relax your muscles is like playing a sport or a musical instrument. You need to practice to get good at it.

### **Relaxing your muscles group by group**

Follow this order when practising.

1. Ankle: Stick your legs out, point your toes together and curl them under, and stick your heels out.
2. Calves: Stick your legs out and point your toes down.
3. Upper legs and thighs: Stick your legs out and tense your thighs.
4. Buttocks: Squeeze your buttocks together.
5. Stomach: Hold your stomach in tightly.
6. Chest: Take a deep breath and hold it.
7. Back: Arch your back so your shoulder blades come together.
8. Hands and wrists: Make fists with both your hands. Pull your fists up toward your wrists.
9. Lower and upper arms: Make fists. Bend both arms up to touch your shoulders.
10. Shoulders: Pull both shoulders up to your ears.
11. Neck: Push your head back into the chair or bed. Push your chin down to your chest.
12. Forehead: Pull your eyebrows close together so your forehead wrinkles.
13. Eyes: Shut your eyes tightly.
14. Nose and upper cheeks: Scrunch up your nose and push your upper lip and cheek toward your eyes.
15. Lips and lower face: Push your lips together and push your tongue on your upper mouth (your upper palate).

## Developing a coping card<sup>26</sup>

A coping statement is a sentence you come up with to help you manage distressing thoughts and beliefs. A coping card is a card you keep with you that contains your coping statement.



Write your coping statement on a card that you can carry with you. Look at it when you need to deal with your distressing thought or belief.

**Example:** Think back to a situation from Module 8 that might cause you a high grade of anxiety such as walking to the shop alone. When you find yourself in a situation like this, you can use your coping statement to help you deal with the anxiety. Read it to yourself calmly until you begin to feel better.



<sup>26</sup> The material was adapted from **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Psychotic Symptoms: A Therapist's Manual**.

.....

# My Coping Card Statements

## Worksheet

What is the distressing thought I want to change?

What is the evidence for my distressing thought?

For	Against
<b>These are my coping statements</b>	

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Comforting yourself

We comfort ourselves by doing something pleasant that makes us feel better. The things that comfort us can be very simple. Here is a short list of things that can provide comfort.

## Ways to comfort yourself

- Buy or pick fresh flowers.
- Change the sheets on your bed.
- Cuddle up to a teddy.
- Eat a favourite food in moderation.
- Wear comfortable clothes.
- Have a bubble bath.
- Hug someone.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Pray or meditate.
- Write in a diary.

**Activity:** Think of three things that you do already to comfort yourself. Tell your therapist about them.

# Tips for coping in different situations

This section contains some simple tips and reminders about ways you can help yourself cope.

## Coping strategies for everyday stress

- Distract yourself
- Go on holidays
- Use humour
- Keep yourself busy
- Exercise and keep active
- Take your prescription medicine
- Pray or meditate
- Sleep
- Talk to a trusted person
- Listen to music

## Coping in a crisis

- Ask for help as soon as you need it
- When you are feeling well, create a crisis plan for yourself
- Give your medicine and dangerous objects such as knives to someone else to look after
- Go outside and kick around cardboard boxes
- Let people know where you are
- Let someone know how you are feeling
- Plan ways to keep you safe
- Remember that situations and feelings change
- Have quiet time
- Shout into your pillow
- Try to identify how you feel

## Ways to relax

- Acknowledge your fear, worry and stress
- Count your breaths
- Dance or go for a walk
- Focus on the position of your body  
How you are standing or lying down
- Listen to guided relaxation
- Give yourself permission to relax
- Listen to relaxing music
- Massage your hands feet, or head
- Relax each muscle individually
- Go swimming or float in the pool
- Do yoga or learn yoga breath

## Recognise the things that might not help

- Denying the problem
- Being told not to talk about voices
- Being over-prescribed medicines
- Drinking and taking illegal drugs
- Labelling yourself as sick or bad
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Not doing anything
- Thinking too much
- Side effects of your medication
- Thinking negatively
- Staying in bed all day

**Activity:** Fill out the worksheet **New coping strategies that work for me.**

# New coping strategies that work for me

## Worksheet

My experience

How I coped	How it changed my distressing experience	Did it help? Write a star if it did.
Started singing and humming a song to myself	Was able to focus on it. Voice reduced	*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

# New coping strategies that work for me

My experience

How I coped	How it changed my distressing experience	Did it help? Write a star if it did.
Started singing and humming a song to myself	Was able to focus on it. Voice reduced	*
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....
.....	.....	.....

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Using positive affirmations to cope and to comfort ourselves

We can get into habits of thinking that are negative or unhelpful. We can use positive affirmations to help us develop new attitudes that are helpful.

A positive affirmation is a supportive idea that you repeat to yourself regularly. You might repeat it many times a day.

It is important to use your affirmation whenever you have a negative thought.

Here are some example statements.

- I am strong.
- I am determined and successful.
- I have inner strength and resources.
- I hold my head up high.
- I like myself.
- I care about others.
- I am calm and confident.
- I can make wise choices.
- I will notice all the positive things that happen today.
- I am a good and worthwhile person.
- I am needed and worthwhile.
- I am a loving person.
- I have a lot to be proud of.
- I am in control of my life.
- I can achieve anything I want to achieve.
- I make wise decisions based on what I know.
- I am moving toward my goals.



Write your positive affirmation on a card and carry it with you.

## How to make a positive affirmation that works for you

- Start your affirmation with I.
- Make a statement that is in the present, not in the future.
- Make a statement that you can believe in even if you don't believe in it right now.

# Coping Checklist: what you've done and what you can do

## Page 1 of 2

### Worksheet

When you are learning a new skill, it is important to practice. Look at the coping strategies below. Tick the ones you have tried. Was it helpful? Was it unhelpful? Write this down.

Coping strategies	What I tried	Did it work? 😊 ☹️
Distraction		
Talking to someone		
Accepting uncertainty		
Focusing on my voices		
Thinking strategies		
Manage mood		
Managing voices		
Coping for every day		
Coping in a crisis		
Recognise what may not help		
Relaxing techniques		
Comforting techniques		
Positive affirmations		

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

# Coping Checklist: what you've done and what you can do

## Page 2 of 2

What coping strategies might work for you in different situations? The table lists some problems. Write in the coping strategy that might work for you.

This is the problem	This coping strategy might work for me
I am too focused on my problems	
I am upset that I have distressing experiences	
I am upset about what I am experiencing	
I have upsetting thoughts	
I feel upset or angry	
I do very little; I am inactive	
I hear distressing voices	
I feel stressed out	
I am in a crisis	
I use unhelpful strategies	
I can't relax	
I need comfort	

**Are there strategies you need to work on more? Do you need some help? Talk to your therapist about this and make notes here.**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Finding more information

There are lots of resources available to help you with your coping skills. You can find many of them online.

Mental Health Ireland	<a href="http://www.mentalireland.ie">www.mentalireland.ie</a>
Irish Advocacy Network	<a href="http://www.irishadvocacynetwork.com">www.irishadvocacynetwork.com</a>
Shine	<a href="http://www.shineonline.ie">www.shineonline.ie</a>
Shine Mental Health Forum	<a href="http://www.mentalhealthforum.net">www.mentalhealthforum.net</a>
Headstrong Ireland (for young people)	<a href="http://www.headstrong.ie">www.headstrong.ie</a>
RENEW Ireland	<a href="http://www.renew-ireland.com">www.renew-ireland.com</a>
Getselfhelp.co.uk	<a href="https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/">https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/</a>