

# Dale S. Sherman, Ph.D.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING COPING & ADJUSTMENT

### **DEFINITION:**

*Coping and Adjustment* refers to the process of managing internal and external demands through whatever resources we have available to us (i.e. cognitive, affective, and behavioral). Coping strategies are specific things we can do to help deal with a stressor or stressful situation(s). Applying the right coping strategy may greatly aid us cope with negative circumstances such as an illness or emotional distress caused by illness.

While there are many theories about coping and adjustment, one idea is that we first evaluate the nature of a threat (primary appraisal) then, we determine what can be done with the resources we have available to overcome it (secondary appraisal). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest there are two broad forms of coping: Problem-focused strategies and emotion-focused strategies. Problem-focused strategies help us alter the source of stress and tend to be used in stressful situations perceived as controllable. Emotion-focused strategies help us regulate the emotional state which has arisen as a result of the stressor and tend to be used in situations perceived as unchangeable. Listed below are a couple of coping strategies that may help with coping and adjustment. This is a partial list. Some may work better than others.

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) Less is more – Use fewer strategies and be precise. Use what works - abandon what does not.
- 2) Combine strategies – Combine the ones that work the best for you.
- 3) Be fluid and flexible – Modify coping strategies as necessary. This is associated with better quality of life. Rigidly staying with poor coping styles is related to poor health, reduced quality of life, and poor mental health. Be open to new things.
- 4) Extreme stress – Recognize high stress situations. Sometimes little seems to help in these circumstances. Do your best. That is good enough. Learn from it and avoid, if possible.

### **MORE EFFECTIVE COPING STRATEGIES:**

- 1) Emotional regulation – Apply purposeful efforts such as venting, cognitive reappraisal & introspection. Observe good mental health. Regularly process your emotional condition and increase awareness of your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors.
- 2) Active Coping – Use specific actions to address specific circumstances.
- 3) Distancing – Take a ‘healthy’ separation or removal from stressful events. Please note this is NOT avoidance.
- 4) Planful-Problem Solving – Develop a realistic plan to address a stressor or situation.
- 5) Positive Reappraisal – Look for the good, no matter how small it may be.
- 6) Social Support – Get support from others, particularly from support that is good and satisfying.
- 7) Existential Meaning – Review what is important to you in your life and its meaning to you.
- 8) Spiritual or religious reframe – If you have a religious or spiritual view, see the bigger picture and your part in it. Reflect on religious or spiritually meaningful material on a regular basis.
- 9) Breathe, relax, & meditate – Use stress reducing activities on a daily basis. This will greatly enhance your ability to cope and adjust when difficult situations arise.

### **LESS EFFECTIVE COPING STRATEGIES:**

- 1) Confrontive coping – Aggressive attempts to alter the situation. Some degree of risk-taking and hostility.
- 2) Self-controlling – Attempts to regulate one's feelings and behaviors.
- 3) Accepting Responsibility – Accepting your actions and try to put things right.
- 4) More is less – Trying to use of too many coping strategies is related to depression and poor acceptance of illness. Sometimes there is nothing 'to do'. Identify those circumstances and use more emotion-focused strategies.
- 5) Control – Attempts to control in uncontrollable circumstances can be maladaptive.
- 6) Poor self-esteem or low sense of personal worth – This has been related to poorer health outcomes and poorer mental health.

### **POOR COPING STRATEGIES (POSSIBLY DAMAGING):**

- 1) Distancing – Particularly when used in excess or when attempting to avoid health promoting activities (i.e. going to your doctor).
- 2) Substance Abuse, addictive behavior, or other forms of self-injury. Use of drugs, alcohol and even food to 'deal with things' can be quite damaging and lead to significant problems in other areas. For instance, eating is often a maladaptive way to avoid everyday problems – no refrigerator therapy.
- 3) Escape-Avoidance – Destructive behaviors used to escape and avoid a stressor(s).
- 4) Denial – Refusal to address or recognize objective facts despite clear evidence.
- 5) Negative thinking and negative self-talk – This is a very prevalent, insidious problem. Identify negative thinking styles and actively choose to change your thoughts this into positive, adaptive outlook(s).

### **FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES:**

- 1) Benson, Herbert, M.D. and Casey, Aggie R.N. (2008) Stress Management: Techniques for preventing and treating stress (Pamphlet). Harvard Medical School.
- 2) Greenberger, D. & Padesky, C. (1995). Mind over Mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think. Guilford Press.
- 3) Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School Benson-Henry Institute for Mind-Body Medicine: [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org)
- 4) Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer.

# Dale S. Sherman, Ph.D.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING STRESS

### **DEFINITION:**

*Stress* refers to the biological and psychological response an individual has to a threat or situation, real or imagined. Generally, *stress* results when the demands of a *stressor* exceed the capacity of the individual to successfully manage the stressor, or, exceed the capacity the individual believes he or she has to manage the stressor. Stress can influence many aspects of our health and emotional well-being. However, not all stress is negative. Managing stress and stressful situations requires practice and mastery. Stress reduction can help you think more clearly, increase your ability to focus, sleep better, reduce tension headaches, etc.

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) KEY – Preparation and daily use of strategies is the key to successfully managing stress. You manage stress best before the stressful event occurs.
- 2) Listen to your body, mind, and emotional condition.
- 3) Perseverance – Keep going. Stress management can be one of the hardest things to learn.
- 4) Insight – Knowledge about your stressor(s) can provide insight about the best strategy to use.
- 5) Extreme case scenario – Research has shown that some situations of extreme stress don't change very easily or very quickly. These situations can be quite resistant to our efforts to change. In those situations, do your best with what you have. That's good enough.
- 6) Maintain health – Poor health is fertile ground for stress related conditions.
- 7) Positive Outlook – Maintain a positive attitude. No negative thinking.

### **SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:**

#### **1) Deep Breathing**

- a. Get into a comfortable position. Sit in a chair, or lie on a bed with good posture in a relaxed position. Reduce distractions. Close your eyes. Start small (i.e. 5 minutes) then increase to longer and longer times.
- b. Place one hand on your chest and another on your stomach.
- c. Begin by taking a deep breath, inhaling slowly through your nose. This should be for about 2 seconds or so.
- d. Allow the breath to fill your lungs so your abdomen (diaphragm) extends without raising your shoulders. Pause for a moment once your lungs are full.
- e. Exhale Slowly – Open your mouth and allow the breath to go out slowly. Exhale in a slow, paced manner. Remember to go s-l-o-w-l-y.
- f. Repeat – Go through the steps of inhaling and exhaling again. Develop a pace of repeating these steps that is comfortable for you. Gradually increase the time you practice.
- g. Other suggestions – Do this when there are no distractions and, preferably, during a regular part of your day (i.e. before bed). Use before stress related events. If you get distracted while doing this, that's ok. Bring yourself back to breathing, let the distraction go, and focus on breathing once again.

## 2) **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

- a. Begin deep breathing. Sit in a chair or lie in a bed with good posture in a relaxed position. Reduce distractions.
- b. Let muscle tone go – Start with one foot, and let all the muscle tone go into the chair, bed, or floor. Let the weight of your foot fall into the chair or bed. The chair will hold you up. The bed will hold you up. If your leg moves a little, that's ok. If you experience a distraction, come back to focus on your breathing, and let the muscle tone/ weight of your foot go once again.
- c. Progressive – Slowly progress up the leg, stopping at each section letting the weight of the shin, thigh, and hip fall into the chair or bed.
- d. Repeat for each body area – Repeat muscle relaxation steps for the other leg and then progress up the back, shoulders, hands, arms, neck, head, etc. so you have thoroughly gone through each area of the body thoroughly.
- e. Maintain – Check in and go over each body area so relaxation is maintained. Repeat as necessary.

## 3) **Guided Imagery**

- a. Begin deep breathing. Do progressive muscle relaxation.
- b. Imagery – Take a slow, purposeful journey to a favorite place you find comforting and safe such as the mountains, ocean, gardens, etc. Look at a couple of pictures before you start to refresh your recall/ experience. Begin by imagining yourself lifting up and up, looking down with your mind's eye as you are sitting in the chair or laying in bed.
- c. Savor the trip – Think about each part of the journey from where you are now as you go to your favorite spot. Imagine you are a leaf floating upward by a gentle breeze, suspending you along until you arrive.
- d. Savor the stay – Imagine with your mind's eye the details about where you are. The sun, the breeze, the clouds, children's voices, the call of the birds, smells, etc. Savor all of it.
- e. Maintain – Remain at your spot for about 15 minutes or so. Increase the time spent there as you are able.
- f. Return – After a period, allow the same gentle breeze to lift you up, and carry you along back to the place you started. Slowly open your eyes. Stay there sitting in the chair or laying in bed for a couple minutes.
- g. Visit frequently – Use guided imagery on a regular basis to reduce stress and maintain calm.

## 4) **Identify Negative Thinking & Negative Self-Talk**

- a. Identify and eliminate negative thinking. This leads to greater stress, a poor self-view, and stormy relationships with others.
- b. Examples: *Note: Some overlap with others . . .*
  - i. All-or-nothing thinking – See everything as extremes, not a range of possibilities.
  - ii. Negative expectations and predictions – Persistent negative predictions/ expectations about the future.
  - iii. Depreciating the good – Positive things don't matter or are looked down upon when they happen.

- iv. Punishment – Punitive self-view. The belief that bad things happen or you are placed in difficult situations as punishment for past sins.
- v. Emotional reasoning – Feeling something *must* make it true. This is frequently the basis for destructive behaviors such as ‘emotional’ rash spending – using the credit card when you can’t afford the item.
- vi. Labeling – Using a negative label to yourself or someone else.
- vii. Over emphasize or over minimize – The tendency to magnifying the negative and/or minimize the positive.
- viii. Cognitive Filter – Limited to seeing details and can’t see the whole picture
- ix. Mind Reader – Interpreting actions of others based on your beliefs, not facts
- x. Generalizations – Global conclusions taken from a minor situation
- xi. “Should” statements – Shoulda, woulda, coulda. Creates negative expectations of self and others
- xii. Cognitive Straight Jacket – Being locked into seeing the world through a rigid set of rules and ideas. Creates straight jacket thinking. Can’t see out of the box.
- xiii. Personalizations – Always seeing yourself as the cause of the problem(s).
- xiv. Catastrophication – Whatever happens, will be disastrous.
- xv. “Ever-critical-eye” – Perfectionistic and critical view of self and/or others. Leads to a cycle of overachievement and disappointment; never measuring up to the expectations of yourself or others.

#### **FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES:**

- 1) Benson, Herbert, M.D. and Casey, Aggie R.N. (2008) Stress Management: Techniques for preventing and treating stress (Pamphlet). Harvard Medical School.
- 2) Greenberger, D. & Padesky, C. (1995). Mind over Mood: Change how you feel by changing the way you think. Guilford Press.
- 3) Jacobson, E. (1929). Progressive Relaxation: A physiological and clinical investigation of muscular states and their significance in psychology and medical practice. University of Chicago Press.
- 4) Massachusetts General Hospital/ Harvard Medical School Benson-Henry Institute for Mind-Body Medicine: [www.mbmi.org](http://www.mbmi.org)
- 5) Siegel, Daniel J. (2007). The Mindful Brain: Reflection and attunement in the civilization of well-being. W. W. Norton.
- 6) Thorn, B.E. (2004). Cognitive Therapy for Chronic Pain. Guilford Press.

# Dale S. Sherman, Ph.D.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

### **DEFINITION:**

Positive thinking and a positive outlook are practical ways to overcome many of life's difficulties, to accomplish your goals, and pursue your dreams. *Positive Thinking* may be defined as a purposeful, specific mental attitude which draws in and focuses our thoughts, words and images on good and favorable results. It is a mental attitude that fosters and expects growth, expansion and success. A positive mind anticipates happiness, joy, health and a successful outcome out of life.

Your actions and emotional condition can be greatly influenced by your expectations. Scheier and Carver (1993) suggest that people who see desired outcomes as attainable continue to strive for those outcomes, even when progress is slow or difficult. However, when the outcome seems impossible or unattainable, they stop trying and disengage themselves from their goals. This means our expectancies provide a basis for one of two types of behavior: (1) continued striving or (2) giving up. This is why focusing and holding onto positive expectancies for the future with positive thinking can help you improve your current situation. In addition, positive and negative thinking are contagious. We can influence other people with our outlook, one way or another. People will be more inclined to help us when we are positive; they will avoid us when we broadcast negativity. This happens instinctively, on a subconscious level, and can even be communicated through our body language. A French psychologist, Emile Coue (1857-1926), introduced a method of self-improvement by repeating the phrase "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better" at the beginning and at the end of every day. He called this approach 'optimistic auto-suggestion'. He believed each person had the solution to their own problem; "You have, in yourself, the instrument of your cure."

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) Always visualize only favorable and beneficial situations – ONLY.
- 2) Think of solutions, not problems.
- 3) Use positive words while thinking and talking with others. Use words such as 'I can', 'I am able', 'It is possible', etc.
- 4) Put a smile on your face, even when you don't 'feel' like it. This sends out positive energy and warmth – happiness can start with a smile.
- 5) Disregard and de-emphasize feelings of laziness, fear, worry, and thoughts of quitting
- 6) Persevere. This will transform the way your mind works.
- 7) Associate yourself with people who think positively.
- 8) Fill yourself with confidence and joy. Expect success. Say 'I can' & 'I will'.
- 9) See yourself successfully completing whatever is before you. This will yield hope, strength, and peace. Your beliefs can turn to attitudes, attitudes turn to thoughts, and thoughts to behaviors.
- 10) Expose yourself to positive things, not negative. Read books that are positive, watch movies that make you happy, etc.
- 11) Read inspiring books or quotes from people you respect or have overcome adversity everyday; many times per day if necessary.
- 12) Apply positive affirmations throughout the day, as much as necessary.
- 13) No negative thinking, no exceptions.

- 14) Find a person in history (real or fictional), a spiritual leader, someone from the bible, or a scripture which inspires you and learn more about them/it.

### **INSPIRATIONAL & POSITIVE QUOTES:**

#### **1) Inspirational Quotes:**

- a. "The positive thinker sees the invisible, feels the intangible, and achieves the impossible."
- b. "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."
- c. "Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around."
- d. "Fear less, hope more; Eat less, chew more; Whine less, breathe more; Talk less, say more; Love more, and all good things will be yours" Swedish Proverb
- e. "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Thomas Edison
- f. "Success is going from failure to failure without losing your enthusiasm." Winston Churchill
- g. "Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." Michael Jordan
- h. "People become really quite remarkable when they start thinking that they can do things. When they believe in themselves they have the first secret of success." Norman Vincent Peale
- i. "He who has a why to live can overcome almost any how." Friedrich Nietzsche
- j. "To consider is to unlock doors, To believe is to open one door, To accept is to open all doors, To surrender is to pass through"
- k. "The difference between being on an unknown journey and being lost is simply a matter of viewpoint."
- l. "When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened up for us." Helen Keller
- m. "It takes but one positive thought when given a chance to survive and thrive to overpower an entire army of negative thoughts." Robert Schuller
- n. "Nothing gives one person so much advantage over another as to remain always cool and unruffled under all circumstances." Thomas Jefferson
- o. "You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do". Eleanor Roosevelt
- p. "Achievement seems to be connected with action. Successful men and women keep moving. They make mistakes, but they don't quit." Conrad Hilton
- q. "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." Helen Keller
- r. "If you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." Dr. Wayne Dyer
- s. "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery. And today? Today is a gift. That's why we call it the present." B. Olatunji
- t. "You have to 'Be' before you can 'Do' and 'Do' before you can 'Have'." Zig Ziglar
- u. "You must be the change you want to see in the world." Gandhi
- v. "Life isn't about finding yourself. Life's about creating yourself." George Bernard Shaw
- w. "Live your life each day as you would climb a mountain. An occasional glance toward the summit keeps the goal in mind, but many beautiful scenes are to be observed from each new vantage point. Climb slowly, steadily, enjoying each passing moment; and the view from the summit will serve as a fitting climax for the journey." -Harold V. Melchert

- x. Don't wish for fewer problems, wish for more skills. Don't wish for less challenges, wish for more wisdom. - Earl Shoaf
- y. "It's through falling down that we get to see things from a different level."
- z. "Courage is not the absence of fear, but the realization that there is something greater than fear." Ambrose Redmoon
- aa. "The true measure of a man is not how he behaves in moments of comfort and convenience but how he stands at times of controversy and challenges." Martin Luther King Jr.
- bb. "Would you rather tell stories of quitting after the first fall in life, or tell stories of how you kept falling but got up every time."
- cc. "Obstacles don't have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don't turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it." Michael Jordan
- dd. "He who has a why to live can overcome almost any how." Friedrich Nietzsche
- ee. "In order to see the rainbow you have to first go through the storm."
- ff. "We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done."
- gg. "People become really quite remarkable when they start thinking that they can do things. When they believe in themselves they have the first secret of success." Norman Vincent Peale
- hh. "It is in dreaming the greatest dreams, seeking the highest goals that we build the brightest tomorrows. Tomorrows are only todays waiting to happen."
- ii. "Maybe good things come to those who wait, but the best things come to those who seize the moment and make it their own."
- jj. "Cherish your yesterdays, dream your tomorrows, but live your todays. Tomorrow belong to those who fully use today."
- kk. "It is always impossible until it's done." Nelson Mandela
- ll. "The grass is not greener on this side of the fence and the grass is not even greener on the other side of the fence. The grass is greener where you water it." Joel Osteen.
- mm. "I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

- 2) **Positive Affirmations/Positive Self-Statements:** Try using positive affirmations or positive-self statements to improve your outlook. These are statements you make to yourself to help move you away from negative ways of thinking and move toward positive actions. In order to ensure the effectiveness of the affirmations, they have to be repeated with attention, conviction, interest and desire. Find a phrase important to you and repeat it as often as necessary. If you try it, and it doesn't seem to work for you, go back to reading through the inspirational quotes. Here are some examples of positive affirmations;

- a. I'm going to be o.k.
- b. I am healthy and happy
- c. I have a lot of energy
- d. My mind is calm
- e. I am calm and relaxed in every situation
- f. My thoughts are under my control
- g. Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better

#### **FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES:**

- 1) Scheier, M. F. & Carver, C. S. (1993). On the power of positive thinking: The benefits of being optimistic. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2, 1.
- 2) Emile Coue (1922). *Self mastery through conscious autosuggestion*.
- 3) Remez Sasson – [SuccessConsciousness.com](http://SuccessConsciousness.com)

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING ATTENTION

### **DEFINITION:**

*Attention* is a general term referring to the ability to focus our mind's direction, sustain focus (resist interference), temporarily hold onto information, selectively shift direction, as well as use or manipulate the information we are focused on. Depending upon the task, attention can be dependent on other higher-order cognitive abilities such as executive functions. The term *working memory*, sometimes called *short-term memory*, has been used to describe our ability to temporarily hold onto information until it can be used or stored in longer-term memory stores. More complex attentional skills, such as *divided attention*, refers to the ability to engage in multiple tasks at the same time (two or more tasks simultaneously).

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) Keep information and tasks in simple, manageable quantities to prevent being overloaded.
- 2) Remain relaxed, well-rested and pace your activity.
- 3) Promote your strengths – Use your strengths to help your weaknesses.
- 4) Ask for help.

### **PREPARATION & ENVIRONMENT:**

- 1) Take time to mentally prepare yourself for an upcoming activity.
- 2) Slow down and give yourself enough time to process information or complete an activity.
- 3) Do one thing at a time.
- 4) Use a simple relaxation technique or deep breathing to help restore mental focus.
- 5) Avoid crowds & interruptions – These place additional demands on attention ability.
- 6) Get plenty of rest. Fatigue can decrease attention. Use deep breathing or relaxation techniques to have a restful sleep.
- 7) Create an environment that minimizes distractions (turn off radios, T.V., phone, iPod, etc.) when needing your attention skills.
- 8) Watch the use of alcohol, medications, and other drugs which may affect attention and cognition. Consult your doctor before making any changes in medication.
- 9) Safety – When driving, do so when well-rested. Resist talking on the phone, listening to radio and engaged in conversation. If it is not safe for you to drive, don't drive. If you are unsure if you can drive safely, get a driving test.

### **SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:**

- 1) Simplicity – Begin with a simple target objective such as reciting numbers or letters (i.e. phone numbers).
- 2) Task Size – Break down large complex tasks into smaller simpler ones.
- 3) Start small and build your skill set – Start with 5 minutes, then increase the time spent.
- 4) Selectivity – Do one task at a time or meet with one person at a time. Decrease multiple demands. When not practicing attention skills, allow more time to do one thing at a time
- 5) Resist shifting away from a task – This is distraction, not attention.
- 6) Slowly increase complexity – Practice attention by inserting distracters to increase skill/ ability.
- 7) Breaks – Take physical or mental breaks as needed when performing sustained tasks. Fill in breaks with rest or “non-thinking” activities, such as light reading, humorous conversation, or a short walk.

# Dale S. Sherman, Ph.D.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING MEMORY

### **DEFINITION:**

*Memory* is the ability to store information, hold onto it, then, retrieve that information at a future date. The cognitive ability to store information, sometimes referred to as *long-term memory*, includes our explicit knowledge, recollection of historic events (time and place), storage of facts, as well as other types of memory processes known as implicit, procedural, and prospective memory. There are various strategies we can use to enhance memory; some focus on storage and new learning (encoding), while others attempt to increase our ability to recall previously stored material (decoding).

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) PAY ATTENTION – Focus on what you need to remember. Maybe, it's not your memory's fault!
- 2) Practice without guessing – If you guess incorrectly and repeat using the wrong information, you will start to learn the wrong stuff. Verify and keep track of your progress. Check in with others.
- 3) As-It-Happens – Use these strategies as things happen. Don't wait to write important information down.
- 4) Normal aging – Remember memory may decline with age.

### **STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE STORAGE AND LEARNING:**

- 1) Repetition & Practice – Repeat what you need to recall over and over in frequent intervals (i.e. 1x /15 min v. 1x /60 min). Use paper and pencil, flash cards, or draw an image. If it is a physical activity or includes physical action (i.e. computer), do the task over and over.
- 2) Simplify – Reduce the amount of information and go over it frequently.
- 3) Visualization – See the information in your mind, or, create a visual association.
- 4) Association – Tie what you want to remember to familiar things you know well.
- 5) Mnemonics – Create a story or phrase with the letters of what you need to learn. Use what you're inclined to remember using familiar or bizarre associations. Use rhymes or tunes.
- 6) 'Chunking' – Divide the information into bite-size portions. Group like things together. A good example is phone numbers . . . (310) 423-9722. Use groupings of 4 or less.
- 7) Write it down – Actively write down what you need to recall. Don't ask someone else to do it!
- 8) Understanding and detail – Go beyond. Find out more information about how items you need to learn are related. This will help you develop associations and gain a 'bigger picture'.

### **STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE RECALL:**

- 1) Contextual learning/recall – Recall information under the same conditions you learned it.
- 2) Structure – Develop a system for routine things you will need to learn then follow it. For example: Always put the car keys in the same place.
- 3) Set limits – Create a time limit to recall the information, then, go over it until you can correctly recall it 10 times without assistance. Refresh as often as necessary.
- 4) Decrease stress and anxiety – This may lead to self-doubt, hesitation, then, use of poor memory strategies (i.e. guessing) which will lead to further problems with anxiety and poor memory.

**USE OF AIDS:**

- 1) Paper-and-pencil, computer, PDA. This greatly increases the amount you can manage.
- 2) Use what-ever-it-takes: Post-its, calendars, journals, day planners, log books, chalk board, refrigerator clips, timers, etc.
- 3) Flash cards – This greatly enhances new learning and storage. Keep your flash cards for a refresher when you need it.

# Dale S. Sherman, Ph.D.

---

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONS

### **DEFINITION:**

*Executive functions* refer to higher-order cognitive abilities including planning, initiating, sequencing, organization, and fluid problem solving to novel situations. *Executive functions* are also involved in 'orchestrating' or unifying many other cognitive activities so these cognitive processes run smoothly. For instance, we tend to focus and recall information better when we organize and sort information into manageable categories. *Executive functions*, or the *frontal lobes*, are also involved in emotional expression and personality.

### **GENERAL TIPS:**

- 1) Create a routine for activities.
- 2) Simplify information whenever possible.
- 3) Use external aids to help organize your environment.
- 4) Stay well-rested and balance activities with breaks.
- 5) Keep a positive attitude when problem solving.
- 6) Focus your attention to the task - Slow down if necessary.
- 7) Lean on others for support and help when needed.

### **SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:**

- 1) Learn to initiate – Go from the external → to the internal – Use a trigger to help you learn initiation skills (i.e. ringer on a timer or alarm). Develop a slow, progressive way for you to adopt the skill.
- 2) Promote your reasoning abilities – Play games that require strategy, such as chess, poker, battleship, bridge, etc.
- 3) Practice problem solving strategies – Prepare, Contemplate, Select, Act, Review, Rehearse, and Master. Plan and do. Once started on a task, don't stop until completed. Review your effectiveness after you complete the task. Ask others to go over your practice task and give feedback. Make corrections as necessary.
- 4) Task Persistence/ Response Inhibition – Both are important. Practice perseverance and maintaining a task. Then, practice inhibition by stopping at various times.
- 5) Categorize & Organize – Practice categorizing objects according to size, shape, color or other classifications shifting from one to another. Progressively increase speed and time limitations with mastery. Flash cards are sometimes helpful.
- 6) Multitasking and switching focus – Try doing two things at once (i.e. reading a name badge while you talk with someone), switch back-and-forth as you are able. Choose safe tasks.
- 7) View errors as learning opportunities, NOT failures – Learn from past mistakes, but don't criticize yourself. This can undermine your progress.
- 8) Generativity – Create an environment of 'green light' thinking. Practice generating ideas and solutions by writing them down or recording them without being critical. Once you have exhausted all the possibilities, then, go over what you have generated and select the best choice, or, rate them on a scale of 1-5 (worst to best), then choose the best.
- 9) Increase awareness – Spend time every day increasing your insight and awareness of what is happening in yourself and in the environment around you. Begin by increasing awareness about your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors by writing these down using a thought record. Identify in detail how these are connected in a particular situation and why.

## STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING COMPLEX PROBLEM SOLVING

### **DEFINITION:**

*Complex problem solving* and executive skills are frequently necessary to successfully solve challenges encountered in daily activities. The following is a detailed list of things you can do to improve your ability to manage deficits associated with problem solving, organizing, and assimilation. The general outline is to plan, execute, and review. Once you complete the planning step, execute without making changes to your plan. Once you have completed the task, review and revise based on how well the plan worked. Repeat as many times as necessary.

### **1. Preparation:**

- a. Assemble necessary articles (i.e. paper and pencil)
- b. Be sure you have had good rest and nutrition
- c. Decrease or remove distractions
- d. Increase focus and attention
- e. Simplicity – Keep things simple!
- f. Formulate Question . . . what is the purpose of what I am doing?
- g. Set Task objective
- h. Rehearsal – Rehearse task steps or review the process you are going to make
- i. DO NOT alter task steps once established
- j. Self – Monitoring – place reminders and focus placards along the way. Create overview or chart diagram of the process if this will help
- k. Apply good cognition and mental health strategies (i.e. positive outlook, no use of catastrophic thinking)
- l. Be solution focused NOT problem focused

### **2. Decipher:**

- a. Identify problem set
- b. Obtain necessary data you think might be involved
- c. Weed out extraneous information
- d. Be selective, not overly inclusive

### **3. Sort, Assimilate, & Group Ideas/ Aspects** – look for the following :

- a. Commonalities
- b. Differences
- c. Collate
- d. Break task down into simpler, bite sized bits.

### **4. Mental Operations** – apply the necessary operation or adapt problem solving skills:

- a. Deductive Reasoning
- b. Methodical application of known operations
- c. Apply thought and consideration

**5. Conclusion:**

- a. Formulate thought
- b. Express thought slowly and methodically
- c. Use paper and pencil or other aids
- d. Rehearse your answer out loud, alone in a room before telling others. Listen to what it sounds like. Does it sound right?

**6. Confirmation:**

- a. Check & double check
- b. Retrace steps
- c. Check with authoritative resource
- d. Confer with a trusted ally/ coworker

**7. Expression/ Revelation:**

- a. Communicate ideas in slow and simple terms
- b. Listen to your words & ideas
- c. Have confidence in your ability and conclusions
- d. DO NOT use negative self-talk or other problematic cognitive strategies (i.e. catastrophic thinking, all-or-nothing, absolutes, etc.)

**8. Repeat & Improve mastery:**

- a. Review and repeat as often as necessary
- b. Increase mastery with repetition