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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
- 4) Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal, and coping. New York: Springer.