MIAMI UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

School Mental Health Communities of Practice

Promoting Positive Coping Strategies in K-12 Students

Coping strategies can make a significant, positive impact on students' lives.
- Students who have learned to use effective coping strategies are:
  - Able to respond better to everyday stress, including school-related stress
  - Able to recover better from existing health problems
    - For example, studies have found that learning how to use effective stress management skills improved migraine sufferers' headache pain and was associated with better outcomes for people who were diagnosed with chronic heart-related conditions
  - Able to sleep better
  - Less likely to suffer from depression and anxiety
  - More likely to have positive outcomes and be resilient in stressful situations

It is important for school personnel to understand the importance of teaching K-12 students how to use effective coping strategies.
- All students experience stress at some point in their lives
- Stress affects students of all ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds
- Stress can have a major impact on both mental health and physical health
- Life stressors are not only negative events (e.g., the death of a loved one, parental divorce) but also can be positive events (e.g., birth of a sibling, moving to a new city)
- Coping strategies are the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions that students can use to adjust to these changes (e.g., life stressors) that occur in their lives
- Some coping strategies are effective (e.g., exercising, deep breathing, positive self-talk, listening to music), whereas other coping strategies are ineffective or even harmful (e.g., non-suicidal self-injury or cutting, substance use or abuse, over-eating or under-eating, avoidance or escaping)
- Coping strategies can have both short-term effects (e.g., reduction in stress level, improvement in mood) and long-term effects (e.g., positive mental health and wellness, positive physical health, positive sleeping and eating patterns, increased resilience)
- It is important for students to employ effective coping strategies when experiencing stress in order to maintain mental and physical health
- Effectively managing stress is an important component of wellness
- Without effective coping strategies, chronic stress has the potential to contribute to significant long-term physical or mental health problems over a student's lifetime

Citation: Project AWARE Ohio (2018). Promoting Coping Strategies in Youth (Information Brief). Retrieved from: http://resources.oberlinkconsulting.com/uploads/infobriefs/Youth_Coping_Strategies_Info_Brief.pdf

<u>It is important for school personnel to know specific action steps that they can take to teach effective coping strategies to K-12 students</u>.

The following action steps will help you teach effective coping strategies to students:

➤ *Model effective coping strategies*: Students learn a lot of skills through modeling the behavior of the adults in their lives. This allows students to see real-life representations of how to effectively cope with stress.

➤ *Support their involvement in sports or other pro-social activities*: Involvement in sports or other extracurricular activities can reduce stress. Encourage and support your students' participation in these kinds of activities.

➤ *Encourage help-seeking behaviors*: Teach students that they should seek help whenever they feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to help themselves. You should be ready to provide valuable resources when students do come to you seeking help.

➤ *Help them look at the situation from a more helpful perspective*: Looking at the situation from a more positive perspective can be very useful in situations where the stressor cannot be changed or altered.

➤ *Acknowledge and validate their feelings*: Some students may feel shy about sharing their feelings or admitting that they need help. Make students feel that their feelings are valid once they do open up.

➤ *Remind your students of a time they coped with something similar in the past*: Learning from past coping successes gives students confidence that can help them better handle their current stressors.

➤ *Help to identify current coping strategies and problem-solve their effectiveness*: This can help students understand what strategies they naturally gravitate toward and problem-solving their effectiveness together is more effective than simply telling students whether their strategies are effective or not.

➤ *Brainstorm personalized coping strategy ideas*: Positive coping strategies will be more effective when they are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the students.

➤ *Develop a plan for coping*: With personalized coping strategies in mind, you can help students develop a series of steps for coping. The first step should be easily attainable, and the students should proceed at a pace that is comfortable for them.

➤ *Promote and acknowledge attempts at using coping strategies*: As students use their coping plans/strategies, praise their attempts, even if they are not always successful. When a coping strategy does not work, spend time with the student to reflect and give feedback for improvement.

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<u>It is important for school personnel to be aware of effective coping strategies for K-12 students</u>.

Coping strategies can be characterized by the ways in which an individual attempts to counteract the negative effects of stress. Below are examples of coping strategies:

Problem-solving coping strategies focus on ways to tackle the issue in order to reduce the stress around a given situation.

- *Problem-solving*: Locating the source of the problem and determining solutions (e.g., delegating responsibility, alleviating the stressor)
- *Personal coping plan*: Creating a personalized plan to use your preferred coping skills when facing stressful situations
- *Time management skills:* Organizing and allotting your time in a proactive manner to achieve tasks and goals in a realistic manner (and reduce stress)

Emotion-focused coping strategies focus on gathering tools to soothe a person's emotional well-being during a stressful event.

- *Emotional awareness:* Having a good 'emotion vocabulary' and the ability to name how you are feeling
- *Humor*: Recognizing the humorous aspects of the problem/stressor and joking about your situation
- *Support from others*: Asking for help or emotional support (e.g., talking with someone you trust, spending time with family/friends, consulting a doctor, joining a support group)
- *Relaxation*: Engaging in relaxing activities or practicing calming techniques (e.g., meditating, praying, getting a good night's rest, listening to music)
- *Physical recreation*: Engaging in regular exercise (e.g., running, team sports, yoga, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation)
- *Positive diversions*: Engaging in positive activities that can take your attention away from the stressor (e.g., write, draw, play a game, time with pets, watch movies, read a book)
- *Gratitude*: Making a list of the things that you are thankful for in your life

Active coping strategies are characterized by awareness of the stressor and attempts at reducing the negative outcomes.

- *Personal goals*: Creating a list of goals that you want to achieve
- *Identification of personal triggers*: Understanding what situations tend to be stressful for you and matching coping strategies/skills to situations
- *Brainstorming solutions*: Making a list of possible ways to reduce the impact of the stress situation in your life, and identifying the pros and cons of each idea
- *Adjusting expectations*: Anticipating various outcomes in order to better prepare for future stressors that may come from life changes/events (e.g., altering your priorities)
- *Limit-setting*: Prioritizing important tasks, dropping less important activities, and scheduling time for yourself

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Organizations with Resources and Information about Coping Strategies

The following organizations can provide you with helpful resources and information about effective coping strategies for your students:

The American Institute of Stress

American Institute of Stress is a nonprofit organization founded in 1978 that provides a diverse and inclusive environment that fosters intellectual discovery, innovative knowledge and improves human health and leadership on stress-related topics.

Phone: (682) 239-6823

http://www.stress.org/

Active Minds

Active Minds is a nonprofit organization that works to increase students' awareness of mental health issues, provide information and resources, and serve as the liaison between students and the mental health community.

Phone: (202) 332-9595

http://www.activeminds.org/

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

ADAA is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety, depressive, obsessive-compulsive, and trauma-related disorders through education, practice, and research.

Phone: (240) 485-1001

http://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety

National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH)

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is the lead federal agency for research on mental disorders. NIMH is one of the 27 Institutes and Centers that make up the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the nation's medical research agency. NIH is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Phone: (866) 615-6464

http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml

Youth Empowerment (from Youth ERA)

Youth Empowerment by Youth ERA aims to give you the knowledge you need in order to conquer the challenges you face affecting your mental health. It is home to self-help articles, resources, and original content from the youth we serve to support their personal growth and emotional development by touching on sensitive topics in an inclusive and trauma-informed way. It is our goal to empower you on your mental health journey—giving you the tools you need to not only survive, but to thrive.

https://www.youthempowerment.com/

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