

Chapter 13 Additional Coping Skills



“God gave us two ends. One to sit on and one to think with. Success depends on which end you use. Heads, you win. Tails, you lose.”

— Anonymous

There are literally dozens of effective coping techniques in the field of holistic stress management. To be effective, however, each technique must help increase awareness of the cause of the problem and assist you in your effort to work toward a peaceful resolution. The following are some additional coping techniques that merit attention and might be quite useful to you as you augment your repertoire of effective coping skills for the duration of your life journey.

Journaling: The Art of Soul Searching

The mind can quickly become a flurry of thoughts and feelings that, like a tempest wind, rushes around the inside of your head at dizzying speeds. Without a release, the pressure can build up dramatically to a point that eventually clouds your vision and ultimately inhibits clear thinking. One way to release this pressure is to get your thoughts and feelings down on paper, and that's the purpose of journal writing.

As a coping technique, **journaling** serves several purposes. First, it provides the means for a healthy catharsis, a way to release pent up thoughts and feelings from your head onto paper. It has long been believed that thoughts and frustrations can eventually become **toxic** if they are not allowed to flow freely out of your system. In fact, research now shows that people who keep a regular journal actually have a healthier immune system. Not only is there a cathartic effect to journaling, but writing your thoughts and feelings down on paper, or perhaps in a computer document, seems to provide insights on possible solutions to a host of problems.

Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than with therapists working with soldiers returning from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), who use journaling as a healthy catharsis.

Aside from a healthier immune system, journaling also has some long-term benefits. By rereading journal entries you can begin to see certain behavior patterns emerge that you might not notice with an occasional journal entry. In its simplest form journal writing is nothing less than soul searching, and there are many themes that can be used as vehicles for self-exploration, including writing poetry (making order out of the chaos of your mind), composing letters (a message of resolution), or simply making lists to organize your thoughts. **Exercise 13.1** is a journal theme that actually helps to provide insights about personal goals and lifetime dreams using a seed as a metaphor.

Support Groups: Friends in Need

In 1989, a landmark study was conducted to show that **support groups** did nothing to promote the longevity of cancer patients. When it came time to analyze the data, David Spiegel, MD, was stunned. The message was clear: Support groups enhance the quality and length of lives. Without a doubt, those patients who partook in support group activities significantly outlived those who did not.

By and large, human beings are social animals. We need the companionship and company of others, if not for physical survival, then at least for moral support on our own human journey. Having a few close friends or colleagues with whom to share time and common interests provides a sense of belonging, a factor long thought to be critical for health and longevity. Sociologists call this the “buffer theory,” suggesting that friends, family, and peers help minimize stress by simply being there to lend a helping hand or an ear to listen when needed. In many cases friends can offer objective insights or opinions that can widen your perspective of the problem at hand.

A strong support group means more than accruing friends on Facebook and posting updates. It means meeting up with close friends for a walk, nine holes of golf, lunch, or shopping. It means cultivating these close friendships with personal face-to-face time.

In this age of high technology, our society has become increasingly fragmented. People spend more time in front of a computer screen or television and less quality time with friends and family. Research based on the “tend and befriend” theory underscores the importance of support groups for women; however, men certainly benefit from this coping skill as well. Connectedness is essential for health and well-being. **Exercise 13.2** challenges you to build stronger support groups as a buffer to stress.

Social Orchestration: Taking the Path of Least Resistance

Avoidance is the number one coping skill to deal with stress. Avoidance is also the number one *ineffective* coping skill to deal with stress. For this reason, avoidance is never advocated unless your life is in physical danger.

Social orchestration is often called the path of least resistance—side-stepping potential obstacles that might later create more stress. Social orchestration is not the same as avoidance. Social orchestration is a coping skill that enables you to organize and reorganize various responsibilities and events in your day or week to decrease feelings of being overwhelmed. Although some aspects of social orchestration, such as prioritizing and scheduling, are under the umbrella of time management, many give this coping skill a place of its own on the spectrum of effective coping techniques because it's that important.

One of the cautions of social orchestration is not to constantly rearrange your social contacts with friends, shortchanging both yourself and others. Be careful not to take advantage of your friends, or the foundation of your support group may start to crumble.

Hobbies and Outside Interests: Following Your Bliss

What do stamp collecting, golfing, and Akebono have to do with stress relief? When used as a diversion from the pressures of work, **hobbies** can provide a wonderful respite from the hassles of the 9–5 job or a stressful course load. Hobbies and outside interests not only provide balance to the mind, but also, in many cases, these activities of passion help you cope with problems in other aspects of your life by transferring the creative juices back to your job or career.

By and large, the process of hobbies such as gardening, photography, playing the guitar, and mountain climbing makes order out of some controlled sense of chaos. The conventional wisdom suggests that by mastering the skills necessary to generate a sense of organization and creativity, these same skills then transfer to other aspects of your life where chaos looms. **Exercise 13.3** challenges you to explore this coping style further.

Dream Therapy: The Royal Road of the Unconscious Mind

Deep in the recesses of the unconscious mind lies a wealth of wisdom that is there simply for the asking, wisdom and guidance that offer keen insights and the means of resolution to a host of issues and problems that surface in the course of our daily lives. Unlike the conscious mind that shuts down while we are asleep, the unconscious mind is active and aware every hour of the day. There is a small catch to obtaining these nuggets of wisdom—they come in a coded language that has to be decoded before they can be utilized. Actually, the unconscious mind is multilingual through the language of dreams, symbols, Freudian slips, and a series of cognitive functions that are clearly associated with the right hemisphere of the brain (e.g., irrational thinking, nonlinear thinking, imaginative thinking, global thinking, intuitive thinking). It is the job of the conscious mind to decode the message of dream symbols. Unfortunately, most people never take the time to learn this language. Consequently, they wander aimlessly through a maze of problems and issues, unable to read the map provided by the unconscious mind, and hence stress is perpetuated.

Dream therapy is a process of taking the time to learn the symbolic language of the unconscious mind as presented in the dream state. Before dream interpretation can start, you first must make a habit of remembering your dreams. This can be done by programming your conscious mind to awake each morning and clearly remember your dreams or dream fragments. As you lay in bed, call to mind these dream passages. The next step is to take pen and paper in hand and record them as best you can. Analyzing your dreams is a process whereby the code of the dream symbols is broken. This can be done in a number of ways, including playing with the dream symbol and providing many interpretations until some tangible insight reveals itself.

Of great interest is the topic of recurring dreams, a message from the unconscious mind that, indeed, there is some problem begging for resolution. This avenue of dream therapy utilizes the power of lucid dreaming (similar to visualization, when you are awake and programming your mind to view a series of scenes). Then you finish the dream by visualizing and writing the script to a logical and peaceful conclusion. **Exercise 13.4** takes you through this healing process, should you choose to do so.

Forgiveness: The Art of Moving on with Your Life

Anger is a survival emotion to be used long enough to get out of harm's way. Anger held longer than this brief moment in time turns toxic and becomes a control issue. You may tend to hold resentment against those who you feel have violated or victimized you, perhaps first as a protection but then as a type of revenge. Revenge, however, is an unhealthy style of mismanaged anger.

If anger becomes a toxin, then forgiveness is an antidote. The last thing people want to hear about in the face of violation is forgiveness, because it feels as if you received another slap across the face or kick in the butt. Surely, there must be adequate time for grieving. However, prolonged grieving can perpetuate mismanaged anger. Forgiveness is both the last stage of grieving and the first stage of celebration.

Here are some quick tips about the art of forgiveness:

1. *Forgiveness means moving on.* Realize that by forgiving someone of a misdeed, you are not doing him or her a favor. Rather, you are releasing yourself from the chains of anger so you can move on with your life. If unresolved anger is giving your power away, then acts of forgiveness mean reclaiming your personal power.
2. *Forgiveness does not mean the same thing as restitution.* Do not expect an apology through your act of forgiveness—you could be waiting a very long time. Most likely you will never receive one.
3. *Forgiveness starts within.* Forgiving someone of his or her misdeed requires that you must first learn to forgive yourself for those things you have done that have been less than stellar. Only by realizing your own misdeeds can you extend a sense of compassion to others, and true forgiveness (without any conditions) is compassion in action.

If you feel there is someone against whom you have been carrying a grudge or have kept their name on the top of your “S list,” now is the time to resolve this stressor, make peace in your heart, and move on. [Exercise 13.5](#) challenges you to engage in the act of forgiveness so that you can carry on with your life without carrying excess baggage.

The Healing Power of Prayer: Divine Connections

In times of stress it is not uncommon to turn to others for help. Sometimes we turn to friends and family. Other times we turn to a greater source or higher power. If stress is indeed a perception of being cut off from the divine, then **prayer** is one means to reestablish this connection. Prayers come in many forms, from words of gratitude to calls for help (also known as intercessory prayer). Over the past decade, the topic of prayer has been of great interest, particularly intercessory prayer when used as a modality of healing in the field of **complementary (alternative) medicine**. Regardless of one's spiritual background, religious upbringing, or lack thereof, the underlying premise of prayer appears to be the quality of intention put forth with request for help and assistance.

To gain the greatest benefit from the healing power of prayer, it's best to understand how to coordinate the efforts of both the conscious and unconscious mind. Based on the wisdom of luminary Sophy Burnham, the following are some aspects (nearly identical in nature to the template for visualization) to consider when using this modality as a coping technique.

1. *Present tense:* To the universal mind or divine consciousness, there is only one time zone: the present moment. Past memories and events as well as future events and aspects are all considered to be included in the present moment as well. Simply stated, divine consciousness appears not to understand events as anything other than now! Therefore, as you state your prayer, think in terms of bringing the image into the present moment as if you are experiencing it now.
2. *Focused concentration:* Prayer requires a clear transmission of intention. Maintaining a clear focus of your attention allows this to occur. Under duress, feelings of fear or anger act like static and tend to garble the message so that it is not heard clearly. Take time to quiet the mind and clear the static for a clear transmission of your request and intention.
3. *Positive thoughts and intentions:* Just as the unconscious mind understands only one time zone, it also understands only positive thoughts. Words expressed negatively are translated into a positive framework. Therefore, to coordinate both conscious and unconscious minds toward a unified goal, construct your prayer in a positive mind frame.
4. *Emotional vibration:* New research on visualization and prayer indicates that thoughts alone produce