

Coping Mechanisms for Youth

Coping mechanisms are strategies that can help people manage stress, reduce anxiety and face uncomfortable emotions. They can be categorized as either adaptive or maladaptive.

Adaptive coping strategies are things that people do to promote resilience and well-being in their lives with the ultimate goal of overcoming what is causing them stress. These strategies can help restore balance and relieve symptoms of stress, while putting someone in a position to better manage difficult thoughts or emotions. Adaptive coping is more likely to result in positive outcomes.



Maladaptive coping strategies are also known as “escapes” as they typically involve distancing oneself from a problem instead of working to solve it. These strategies may provide short-term relief for someone, but they usually do not solve the underlying problem(s). Maladaptive coping is less likely to result in overall positive outcomes in the long run, and may contribute to additional stress in other, unforeseen ways.

Maladaptive coping strategies can often worsen stress and anxiety over time, leading to negative long-term mental and physical health consequences. Examples of maladaptive coping include:

- Aggressive outbursts, which can lead to confrontation and violent situations
- Social isolation, which can damage social relationships and push loved ones away
- Excessive screen time, leading to a lack of sleep or physical activity
- Obsessing over problems, without seeking professional support to find solutions
- Binge eating, which can result in issues with physical health (diabetes, high blood pressure)
- Substance use, which can lead to dependency, overdose, hospitalization and harm

Substance Use & Coping

Young people may turn to alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and opioids to cope with stress, anxiety, or depression. While these substances may provide temporary relief, they can lead to serious health issues and an increased risk of developing a substance use disorder.

- **Alcohol:** Regular alcohol use can worsen anxiety and depression over time, cause insomnia and other significant health risks to the heart, liver, stomach and other vital organs.
- **Nicotine (Tobacco/Vaping):** Smoking or vaping can lead to nicotine dependency, contribute to anxiety disorders and contribute to long term health risks to both the heart and lungs.
- **Cannabis:** Cannabis use can impair cognitive function, cause paranoia, delusions, panic attacks, and contribute to psychological disorders such as psychosis and schizophrenia in vulnerable people.
- **Opioids:** Opioid misuse can lead to overdose and severe health consequences in both the short and long term, while long-term opioid use is associated with increased anxiety and depression.



Coping Mechanisms for Youth

Adaptive coping strategies can help a young person manage stress and improve their overall well-being. These techniques focus on positive, proactive actions that can help someone adapt to stressful or difficult situations, promoting long-term mental and physical health.

Adaptive coping strategies can be behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or active.



Behavioural

Actions taken to reduce stress through physical activities and healthy lifestyle choices. Examples include exercise, healthy sleep and diet.



Cognitive

Techniques involving changing thought patterns to manage anxiety. Examples include talking with someone you trust, writing a journal or practicing yoga.



Emotional

Methods that are used to help manage emotions and improve mood. Examples include listening to music, creating artwork and spending time outside.



Active

Directly addressing the source of stress. Examples include settling disputes with others directly, or speaking with a supervisor about concerns at work.

It's never too late to start developing healthy coping skills in kids.

Parents can promote their child's use of adaptive coping strategies to cope with stress and other challenges by:

- Enhancing family support
- Positive role modelling
- Taking an interest in a child's hobbies and asking about their interests
- Encouraging positive peer relationships
- Educating about substance use risks
- Supporting a child's school and community engagement
- Encouraging volunteering and helping them seek career opportunities
- Visit our [Parent Support Hub](#), a free 24/7 resource to provide direct support for parents and families

