
Are you a Coper or a Cop-Out?

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A “coper” you ask? You’re right- it’s not a word....well, not that I know of. And on top of that, I do not like to label people. But I bet the title was catchy enough to get you to scroll down to this article! The big question is whether or not you have and utilize coping skills. If you can’t identify the skills you use, it certainly doesn’t mean they aren’t there. Each of us gets through trying times by using a method of coping. These ‘times’ might be as trivial as getting to work on time or as severe as a death in the family.

Our ability to cope is impacted by a variety of factors in our lives. Our health, our support systems, our living conditions, work environment, relationships, etc. all play a role in how we choose to perceive a situation and then behave around that situation.

In regards to weight loss and achieving our health and fitness goals, it is often important to assess how we are coping with life’s stressors and to determine whether we are doing so optimally in order to not only keep up with our wellness routines but perhaps use them as one of our coping skills. Coping can be done in two ways: adaptively or dysfunctionally. You may perform deep breathing when you’re stuck in traffic to relieve stress and calm your nerves. Your work partner might reach into his glove compartment and grab the whiskey he has stashed in there. You can discern which one is functional vs. dysfunctional.

Events that may require coping come in two different packages as well. Some we can control; others are thrust upon us without warning and come as a surprise. The marathon you are running in a few weeks may be causing some anxiety, but you chose to sign up for the race and are making the necessary preparations to do your best. The tornadoes that ripped through Virginia recently were completely out of our control, came as a surprise, and caused much chaos and harm.

Regardless of the type of event, effective strategies abound for responding to them. I encourage you to peruse these lists and identify those which you may be using currently (functional or dysfunctional) and those that you may wish to adopt in order to be at your best and healthiest.

Problem-Focusing Coping: These responses are ACTIVE and use both mental (cognitive) and behavioral strategies to resolve a problem or reconcile a conflict. They are used more often when a person feels that taking action will have a beneficial effect. (Note that this also means that the person has a sense of industry, responsibility, and feels that they can make a difference).

Cognitive strategies are used to gain a new perspective on the problem and include the following: maintaining a positive outlook, using positive self-talk, mental imagery, rehearsing specific behaviors.

Behavioral strategies include: developing a plan of action and gathering information through research or getting advice from others.

Emotion-Focused Coping: Include both cognitive and behavioral strategies; however, they do not directly affect the problem. These are effective for situations in which you

have no control (i.e. a family member has been diagnosed with a deadly disease or your home was demolished by an earthquake). These strategies include the following:

1. Avoidance- a dysfunctional coping method that typically does not result in healthy adjustment (i.e. canceling your appointment or refusing to talk about it)
2. Distraction- diverting your attention from the problem and focusing elsewhere, i.e. socializing with friends or taking a break from thinking about it
3. Denial- can be protective from emotional pain but can be dysfunctional if it prevents problem-focused coping
4. Lines of Defense- used in order to forget or avoid the problem and can be either adaptive and healthy or not (i.e. humor vs. using drugs)

Now think of what you do when you experience a set back with your weight loss efforts. When you go to weigh in after one week and you don't see the loss you expected, what do you do both mentally and behaviorally? What are the thoughts in your head? What are your actions? Are they positive? Will they help you progress, learn, grow, and change?

I'd love for you to be a positive copier rather than perceiving events as reasons to throw in the towel or tell yourself that you just can't do it. Don't let struggles or problems be cop-outs to try again. Practice changing the way you think and respond.