

How to Help Students

Gain Effective Coping Skills

*Self-Advocacy,
Agency and
Resilience*





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Learning Something New

One way to build emotional strength and resilience to weather setbacks and navigate life's volatility – particularly in difficult times – is to learn something new. That's why many people took advantage of the multiple free/low-cost classes, webinars and lectures happening during the pandemic – and beyond.

It's all part of the theory that to deal effectively with change, it helps to be engaged in changing yourself. "One of the things that makes us resilient is that when we see a challenge, and when we face a struggle, we engage with it, rather than shut down," Simon Sinek, author of *The Infinite Game* and *Start With Why*, told *The New York Times*. "What I have learned from my career is that something I learned over here helps me over there. Even if I don't know what is happening, any kind of learning benefits all aspects of life."

Plus, when you stay curious, you show up with interest and what Sinek calls "a student's mindset." This can help you figure things out more effectively – and have confidence in your ability to do so – when a crisis hits, according to Beverly Jones, an executive career coach who wrote *Think Like an Entrepreneur, Act Like a CEO*. When active learners hit bumps in the road, she said, "they spend less time lamenting and quickly turn to determining what they must learn in order to climb out of the hole."

What Would You Like to Learn?

So, what learning possibilities are on your list? Jot down 10 of them here without overthinking; just have them be things you think might be kind of cool to learn.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Now, circle one that feels possible to put into action within the next month.

Source: The New York Times, 9/2/20

"When I Expand My Brain, My Wingspan is Greater"

A South Euclid Municipal Court judge told *The New York Times* how she took classes in American Sign Language, labor trafficking and how to get a commercial driver's license. "I don't have a reason to use these things in my professional life," she said, "but learning helps me to focus better. It's also something that I have some control over. I take classes in subjects I am just wildly interested in learning about. When I expand my brain, my wingspan is greater. It lets you get a little higher, to get above the headwinds."



Developing a Failure Resume

Believe it or not, one way to increase your coping and adaptability skills is to focus on those times when you made a mistake, changed your mind or were just plain wrong. There are great things to be learned from life's screw-ups!

Developing a Failure Resume can allow you to reflect on these mistakes and make better decisions in the future. That's all part of coping well in a variety of situations.

So, what would you list on your Failure Resume? Perhaps it's the time you were working with a group to plan an event, took everything on yourself and the event wound up failing miserably because no one else had any personal buy-in. Or maybe the way you sent an email in the heat of the moment and still regret what you said, wishing you'd taken a beat before pushing "send."

Whatever your mistakes include, try listing some here along with the lessons learned from each...

My Mistake	Lessons Learned

Increasing Your Adaptability

Adaptability – which TED Talk speaker Natalie Fratto defined as “how well a person reacts to the inevitability of change” – is a trait that can serve all of us well during uncertain times. It helps us stay indispensable and employable as students and workers, while also helping us stay flexible to contend with whatever life presents.

“Adaptability has to be proactive, not reactive,” Fratto said. “We have to seek it out, exercise it and flex it like a muscle.”

Her TED Talk with more adaptability strategies can be seen here: <https://bit.ly/3DZmTeY>.



Tuning In to Your Stress Signals

How does your stress show up? What are the signs unique to you?

Identifying these stress signals is an important first step in developing healthy coping skills, according to The Ohio State University's Office of Student Life Parent and Family Relations Office. Stress signals tend to come in four main categories, they say...

- **“Feelings:** moodiness, irritability, excessive anger, embarrassment, fear of failure.
- **Thoughts:** self-criticism, difficulty concentrating, difficulty making decisions, forgetfulness, worrying, repetitive thoughts, thoughts of failure.
- **Behaviors:** crying, increased or decreased appetite, lashing out at friends, acting impulsively, alcohol or other drug use (including smoking), nervous laughter, teeth grinding or jaw clenching, stuttering or other speech difficulties, being more accident-prone.
- **Physical signs:** sleep disturbances, tight muscles, headaches, fatigue, cold or sweaty hands, back or neck problems, stomach distress, physical illness (colds and infections), rapid breathing, pounding heart, trembling, dry mouth.”

Your Stress Signals

With all of that in mind, how do you know when you are stressed? List some of your key stress signals...

Now that you've identified your personal stress signals, consider the coping skills you can try to knock out your stress.

Source: The Ohio State University's Office of Student Life Parent and Family Relations Office, <https://parent.osu.edu>



Practicing Limit-Setting

Limit-setting is one of the most difficult things for some people to learn, yet it can provide them with some of the most peaceful, healthy results. It's about learning to say "no" in positive ways that meet your own needs while also not overpromising things to others and letting them down.

Learning to set limits can improve your coping skills because your time is not chock-a-block scheduled without room for flexibility. That way, if you need to deal with a personal issue or step away to practice self-care, you're not causing all your other commitments to come tumbling down.

So, if you had to set limits in the following areas, what is one way you could do so for each element?

Drop an Involvement So Your Time Isn't Too Packed

I could: _____

Prioritize Something Important to You

I could: _____

Schedule Time for Yourself

I could: _____

Assertively Communicate with Someone to Set a Needed Boundary

I could: _____

These actions may not be fully comfortable, yet their end results can add to your quality of life in immeasurable ways.



Discussing Negative Coping Skills

As we talk with students about positive coping skills, it's also important to acknowledge the negative coping skills that many people turn to at some point. Many students are struggling with this fact.

This activity can set up an honest conversation about negative coping skills, either as an exercise on its own or as a way to launch into further discussion about developing positive coping skills.

To Do:

- Explain that you'd like to talk honestly about negative coping skills some students employ without judgment or finger-pointing
- Ask them to anonymously jot on index cards some negative coping methods they've used in the past and/or are currently using
- Then, read them aloud and post them where all can see to open the discussion...
 - What do you think of this method?
 - Why might people turn to it?
 - How could it be stopped?
 - What long-term impacts could it have?
 - What might some alternatives be?
- After you've discussed the various negative coping methods, brainstorm a big list of positive coping skills that could be used instead. This can be done by participants jotting their thoughts on large pieces of poster paper or on sticky notes that are then posted on the wall.
- Consider making all participants a copy of the list so they have a wealth of positive coping skills at the ready!

Examples of Negative Coping Skills

- Drinking excessively
- Using other drugs
- Hanging out with people who don't have your best interest at heart
- Engaging in self-mutilation
- Ignoring or bottling up your feelings
- Working too much
- Eating too much
- Avoiding your problems
- Taking stimulants or sedatives
- Engaging in unhealthy relationships
- Being in denial

Source: PositivePsychology.com



Speaking the Truth of Things

"Sometimes you just need to talk about something – not to get sympathy or help, but just to kill its power by allowing the truth of things to hit the air."

– Karen Salmahsohn

As we try to make the best of challenging times, we sometimes squelch the truth. We don't admit how we're really feeling ("I'm so lonely."). We put on a brave face. We try to lead with optimism and helpfulness.

Yet, sometimes, we just need to allow "the truth of things to hit the air," as the above quote says. We need a friend to let us get it out. We need a family member to listen without giving sympathy or advice. By letting the truth out, it doesn't hold as much power. It doesn't swirl around inside us, wreaking havoc. Instead, it's out there, ready to address.

As you think about some of these truths that are holding power over you, what comes to mind?

Who on campus might you talk with about these things?

When we speak the truth of things out loud, those emotions often don't claim as much power over us. And we're then better able to cope with their reality.

Name Your Grief

Identifying your grief is often necessary to accept it and work through it. So, consider what losses you're mourning that may be pandemic-related. Cancelled events you were looking forward to? Friendships/relationships that never got a real chance? Research or internships that were stalled? The loss of people you hold dear?

When you name your grief, you have a better chance to put your emotions in motion and face them directly. Otherwise, the loss can swirl around you, unnamed and unresolved.



Overcoming Thinking Traps

Why is it that we're wired to react more intensely to negative events than positive ones and to remember insults more than praise?

We often get ourselves into thinking traps – where our negative thoughts spiral and make things out to be worse than they truly are. These cognitive distortions can impact our coping skills, so it's important to recognize them. Some **common cognitive distortions**, according to Mental Health America (MHA), include...

“Overgeneralization: Making a broad statement based on one situation or piece of evidence.

Personalization: Blaming yourself for events beyond your control; taking things personally when they aren't actually connected to you.

Filtering: Focusing on the negative details of a situation while ignoring the positive.

All-or-Nothing Thinking: Only seeing the extremes of a situation.

Catastrophizing: Blowing things out of proportion; dwelling on the worst possible outcomes.

Jumping to Conclusions: Judging or deciding something without all the facts.

Emotional Reasoning: Thinking that however you feel is fully and unarguably true.

Discounting the Positive: Explaining all positives away as luck or coincidence.

'Should' Statements: Making yourself feel guilty by pointing out what you should or shouldn't be doing, feeling, or thinking.”



Overcoming Thinking Traps *continued*

Challenging Negative Thoughts

To get out of these types of thinking traps, MHA recommends challenging negative thoughts by...

Reframing. This is viewing the situation in a different way. “It can be hard to do this when you’re feeling down on yourself, so ask yourself what you’d tell your best friend if they were saying those things about themselves.”

Proving Yourself Wrong. Take action to combat negative thoughts. Learn something new if you’re not feeling smart about another topic. Call a friend if you’re feeling lonely or like no one cares. “Give yourself evidence that these thoughts aren’t entirely true.”

Countering Negative Thoughts with Positive Ones. Say something nice about yourself to counter a nasty inner dialogue. “Name things you love, like, or even just don’t hate about yourself – we all have to start somewhere!”

Remembering That Thoughts Aren’t Facts. We can be our own worst enemies, seeing ourselves in a negative light when others see us much more positively. “Your thoughts and feelings are valid, but they aren’t always reality.”

Source: Mental Health America, Tools2Thrive



The Student Psychological Resilience Project at SUNY New Paltz

Students at the State University of New York at New Paltz who are struggling with stress related to the pandemic and other challenges now have a new ally: the Student Psychological Resilience Project, which uses a peer education model. Ten trained Student Resilience Advocates provide psychological first aid education and stress management tools to help students gain coping skills that can help them now and carry them into the future.

“College students are currently living through multiple losses due to the pandemic,” said Amy Nitza, director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health (IDMH) and associate professor of psychology. “They also continue to grapple with issues such as institutionalized racism, financial challenges and an unrelenting news stream, much of it not positive. This is different from acute trauma. It’s a fluid situation that requires them to be flexible and adaptive on a day-to-day basis.”

“Mental health is an important issue that needs to be spoken about in the climate of a campus environment,” said Alyssa Dudinyak '22 (Visual Arts). “I’m excited to be an advocate for mental health among my peers and to let them know that their concerns are not isolated. We’re all in this together and I want to help them through this.”

You can read more about this project at: <https://bit.ly/3ll5GFu>.

Source: New Paltz News, 8/28/20

“The Student Psychological Resilience Project Fund seeks to develop a comprehensive program in psychological first aid, psychoeducation and stress management to prepare all SUNY New Paltz students with the coping skills necessary to build a stable foundation for their future personal, academic and ultimately professional success.”

Source: New Paltz News, 8/28/20