Mental Health – Coping with Stress

1 of 18 – Welcome

Welcome to this session on coping with stress​.

By the end of the session you will cover the following:

* Understand that different skills will be more effective at different times, depending how full your stress bucket is
* Know some positive coping skills to help you manage your stress
* Use mindfulness as a tool to help you notice how full your bucket is
* Develop your own resilience and coping skills to plan to help you manage your experiences

2 of 18 – Before we start…

Whilst working through this session we encourage you to involve tutors, parents, carers or partners for support. This will help you to discuss the different strategies, come up with ideas about how to implement them, and give you a chance to explore together the best way of being supported. Everyone is different and facing different pressures in their lives, so you should take the time to explore the session fully to learn about different strategies that may help you.

Whilst this session offers a number of practical strategies of support during these difficult times, it is not intended to replace or substitute professional psychological treatments.

You should always seek expert advice if you have any concerns.

3 of 18 – Introducing coping skills

All of us are unique. Some things will work better for some people than they do for others. By practicing lots of different coping skills and by developing your own coping skills plan, you can make sure you are doing what is most helpful for you. It can be scary or uncomfortable trying something new – but unless we try, we will never find out what works for us!

4 of 18 – Noticing

There are lots of steps you can take to help yourself. The most important first step is to stop and notice what is going on.

Once you are aware of what is happening it will be easier for you to choose the best strategy to help you manage your current situation. Different skills will be helpful at different times depending on the situation and how full your stress bucket is.

5 of 18 – Triggers

“Triggers” refer to situations, places or times when your distress is likely to increase. Make a note of your triggers.

Some triggers may be avoidable. For example, if things you see on social media or the news remind you of negative past experiences, it may be helpful to limit the amount of time you expose yourself to such triggers until you are confident that you can manage the emotions that come up for you.

Look at your list of triggers. Are any of your triggers avoidable? What steps can you take to limit your exposure to such triggers?

Other triggers may be unavoidable. For example, it is impossible to never make a big or difficult decision, and certain times of the day or year will always occur whether you want them to or not. Where your triggers cannot be avoided, you need to develop effective routines and strategies to manage your experience in these challenging moments.

Look again at your list of triggers. Are any of your triggers unavoidable?

6 of 18 – Coping ahead

Knowing which situations are going to be challenging to manage gives you power.

It is hard to react well in moments of stress, but you can plan for them in advance if you know they will occur. Anticipating how you may respond and taking positive actions in advance to help you cope before, during and after the event is known as coping ahead.

Let's think about how to create a cope ahead plan. Start by thinking about a potentially difficult situation that may be happening for you soon. Make some notes about the situation, saying why it is hard and what you're likely to think, feel and do. What coping skills can you use to manage the situation before, during and after it happens? Make a note of them too.

7 of 18 – The step ladder approach

It is an understandable human response to want to avoid situations, places and things that make you anxious. This is especially the case when something unusual is happening, such as the COVID-19 lockdown. Unfortunately, sometimes avoiding these triggers can mean you miss out on important things or things that you were looking forward to.

For example, being anxious around people can make you want to stay at home and avoid going out. However if you do so you may miss out on lots of events that are important to you, such as weddings, christenings or birthday parties.

It can feel impossible to jump straight into some of the things you want to be doing, almost as if you were trying to climb a vertical wall. However, by breaking your goal down into small steps your goals can feel more achievable. This is called the step-ladder approach. The key to this approach is to repeat each step, staying with the situation until your anxiety rises and falls again. When you feel more confident, you can move onto the next step.

Let’s look at an example of how you can use the step ladder approach to achieve a goal.

My goal: I would like to be able to drive myself to the supermarket to do the shopping on my own. I am scared to drive my car following an accident I had.

Here are steps you could take to help you achieve this goal;

1. Sit in the car on the drive
2. Sit in the car with the engine on
3. Reverse on and off the drive
4. Drive up and down my street
5. Drive to the supermarket and back with someone else in the car
6. Drive to the supermarket and straight back on my own
7. Drive to the supermarket and shop on my own

Now it’s your turn. Think of a goal you would like to accomplish. Write down the steps you could take to get to that goal. You can have as many or few steps as you wish.

8 of 18 – Hobbies as coping skills

When you are feeling low, it is helpful to do positive activities to reduce your stress and give you positive motivation. There are lots of different hobbies you could do to help you build your sense of self and gain a sense of purpose. Hobbies don’t have to be expensive and can be more or less active depending on your interests. They can also be a great source of fun, calm and comfort.

Here are some hobbies you could try;

* Musical hobbies, such as singing, listening to music, playing a musical instrument or dancing
* Crafting and making, such as sewing, scrapbooking, candle making, knitting or crocheting
* Active hobbies, such as yoga, sports, cycling, swimming or hiking
* Artistic hobbies, such as painting, colouring, sketching or sculpting
* Home-based hobbies such as reading, baking, playing computer games, gardening or puzzles

What hobbies do you enjoy already that might help you to reduce your stress? What new hobbies would you like to try in the future? Make a note of your ideas. You may wish to keep this list to refer to later.

9 of 18 – The self-soothe toolbox

During distressing times, it is difficult to think rationally and to decide how to help yourself. At these times, you may resort to using unhelpful coping skills. Unhelpful coping skills may relieve your distress in the moment, but ultimately recycle your problems back into your bucket.

You can make it easier to find a helpful coping skill by preparing them in advance, before you find yourself in a difficult moment. To help you do this, you can fill a box with lots of different things that make you feel better. We call this a self-soothe toolbox or coping toolkit. Having this box prepared and ready means you have lots of things ready to help you when you need them.

Here are some suggestions for things you might consider including in your self-soothe toolbox:

1. Photos of friends, family, pets or places
2. Favourite uplifting films or TV shows
3. Music that makes you feel happy
4. Phone numbers you can call for support
5. Sachets of tea, coffee or hot chocolate
6. Snacks or sweets
7. Favourite perfume, cologne or scents
8. Bubble bath, face mask or nail polish
9. Comfy socks, blanket or a teddy bear
10. Puzzle books or things to colour in

Make a note here of items that would be helpful for you to have in your self-soothe box. You can be as specific (e.g. a photo of my family from our holiday last year) or as general (e.g. some comfy socks) as you wish. You may find it helpful to keep this list to create your own box to help you in the future.

10 of 18 – Practicing self-compassion

Practicing self-compassion means showing yourself the same care, kindness and understanding you give to other people. When you make mistakes, embarrass yourself or don’t achieve a goal you have set for yourself, it is easy to become self-critical and treat yourself harshly.

Practicing self-compassion encourages you to remember that you are only human, and no human can do everything perfectly all of the time. Imagine what you would say to a best friend if they said something critical about themselves. Think carefully about the tone and volume you would use when talking to your best friend. Try to use the same tone with yourself.

The first step is to stop and notice when you are being self-critical or harsh towards yourself. Catching the thought gives you the chance to consider how you respond to yourself.

Can you think of some of the negative things that you say to yourself? Write three of them down. Now try and write a self-compassionate thought you could say to yourself instead. If you are finding this hard, imagine you are talking to a friend instead of to yourself – what would you say to them?

11 of 18 – Breathing exercises

Breathing helps to slow down or to even stop the stress response! Breathing correctly is hard, and it is important to practice. It is important to learn to take deep breaths by breathing through your belly and not your chest. It may help to hold your hand on your belly so that as you breathe in you watch your body rise and as you breathe out you feel the air in your body reduce. Watch this video to see a five minute guided breathing exercise: <https://youtu.be/04PgJqJGLQc>

If you find yourself in a difficult moment, it can help to use the square breathing method.

1. Count to four as you breathe in through your nose.
2. Hold your breath for four seconds.
3. Count to four as you breathe out through your mouth.
4. Count to four before starting again.

Keep repeating this pattern for as long as you wish. You can use the square breathing method anywhere you want, at any time. Taking control of your breathing like this will help you feel calm, centred and balanced. It can help you to instantly reduce the anxiety or stress you feel.

12 of 18 – What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a great tool to help you gain control and respond to things going on around you. It is a great way to stop and notice your current experiences, to help you understand how you are feeling and what you need.

Mindfulness means paying attention and being open to your current experience in the present moment, without judging your experience. This means noticing and acknowledging your thoughts and feelings just as they are, without believing you should change them or that they should go away.

You can be mindful when doing anything. Some people may choose to do specific mindfulness exercises, whilst other people may choose to ground themselves in the activities of their daily life, for example whilst doing the washing up. It’s about giving things a go and finding what works for you!

13 of 18 – Grounding

When you are overwhelmed it is easy to become disconnected from the present moment. When that happens it is helpful to remind yourself where you are now.

Grounding exercises make you focus on the present world around you instead of the thoughts inside your head. By using all of your five senses (sight, touch, hearing, smell and taste) you can stop yourself from getting caught up in your thoughts or feelings.

To use your senses to ground yourself in the present:

1. Look around for five things that you can see, and say them out loud. For example you could say, I see the computer, I see the cup, or I see the picture frame.
2. Pay attention to your body and think of four things that you can feel, and say them out loud. For example you could say, I feel my feet warm in my socks, I feel the smooth handle of my coffee cup or I feel the pillow I am sitting on.
3. Listen for three sounds. It could be the sound of traffic outside, the sound of a clock ticking or the sound of music playing. Say the three things out loud.
4. Say two things you can smell. It’s okay to move to another spot and sniff something. If you can’t smell anything at the moment or you can’t move, then name your two favourite smells.
5. Say one thing you can taste. It may be the toothpaste from brushing your teeth, or a mint from after lunch. If you can’t taste anything, then say your favourite thing to taste.

14 of 18 – Question 1

What is a trigger?

1. Something that should be ignored
2. Something that sets off a memory or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma
3. A type of sport

The correct answer is:

**B - Something that sets off a memory or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma**

15 of 18 – Question 2

Callum has decided to make a self soothe toolbox to help him cope in difficult times. He has collected some things he could include. Which of these things would be useful for Callum to include in his self-soothe toolbox?

1. Fidget spinner
2. CD of favourite music
3. Bottle of wine
4. Photograph of his friends
5. Tea bags
6. Packet of cigarettes
7. Colouring pencils and book

The correct answers are:

**Callum should include the fidget spinner, CD of his favourite music, photograph of his friends, tea bags and the colouring pencils and book.**

16 of 18 – Question 3

Is the following statement true or false?

Practicing self-compassion means showing yourself the same care, kindness and understanding you give to other people.

The correct answer is:

**True**

17 of 18 – Question 4

What is mindfulness?

1. Something you have to pay for
2. A tool to help you gain control and respond to things going on around you
3. Medicine you can get from the pharmacy

The correct answer is:

**b) a tool to help you gain control and respond to things going on around you**

18 of 18 – End

Well done. You have completed this session on coping with stress.

You should now be able to:

* Understand different skills are effective at different times
* Identify some positive coping skills to help you manage
* Use mindfulness as a tool to help you notice how full your bucket is
* Know how to build a self-soothe toolbox to help you to manage your experiences