



# Stress and Coping

## Introduction

Everyone experiences stress. However, when people are faced with difficult or stressful situations, they are often left wondering how to deal with them. Sometimes the negative emotions from these situations can feel overwhelming, and solutions seem difficult to find. How each of us faces stressors in life is not a personality trait and everyone can learn and improve the way they handle it.

## Stress

**Stress** is a natural, physical and mental reaction to life experiences. Anything from everyday responsibilities, like work and family, to serious life events, such as a new diagnosis, job loss or death of a loved one, can trigger stress<sup>1</sup>. Everyone experiences stress from time to time, but many do not know how to manage it. Stress can become unhealthy when it upsets your day-to-day functioning<sup>3</sup>.

For immediate, short-term situations, stress can be beneficial to health. It can help us cope, or deal with potentially serious situations. Our body responds to stress by releasing hormones like Adrenaline. Hormones are natural chemicals in our bodies that act like messengers to our brain, muscles, and other systems. After being made in one part of the body, they travel to other parts of the body where they help control how organs do their work. For example, Adrenaline increases our heart and breathing rates. It also makes our muscles ready to respond to potential threats, like when a deer is ready to run if a wolf shows up. Yet, if these stress levels stay too high, for too long than is necessary for survival, it can take a toll on our health. When

experiencing a low amount of stress for a long period of, it is no longer healthy and can affect our overall well-being in a negative way. This is called Chronic Stress. Chronic Stress can cause or worsen mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. It can also impact physical health by causing or worsening heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, menstrual problems, sexual dysfunction, skin and hair problems, and gastrointestinal problems<sup>9</sup>. That is why when stressors come up, it is important to handle them properly to avoid getting hurt<sup>1</sup>.

## Coping Strategies

**Coping strategies** are the specific efforts that people use to tolerate and minimize stressful events. These efforts can be both things we do and things we think. Coping strategies can help people adjust to stressful events while helping them maintain their emotional well-being<sup>4</sup>.

There are two general approaches to coping strategies: **problem-solving** and **emotion focused**.

### *Problem-Solving*

When using problem-solving strategies, we do something active to reduce feelings of stress. When we use these strategies, we target the source of the stress. For example, making a list of tasks and priorities could be a helpful problem-solving strategy to deal with a lot of responsibilities at work or school.

In general, problem-solving strategies are a good way to deal with stress because they help us act to remove the stressor. Dealing with the root cause of the problem provides a long-term solution; however, it is not always possible to use problem-

solving strategies. These strategies will not work in situations where the individual does not have any control or power to remove the source of stress. That's when we need to use other types of coping strategies.

### *Emotion Focused*

Emotion focused coping strategies involve efforts to regulate the emotional consequences of stressful or potentially stressful events<sup>7</sup>. When we use these strategies, we try to manage the emotions associated with the situation, rather than changing the situation itself. A lot of times these strategies help us to reduce the unhelpful emotional responses associated with stress such as embarrassment, fear, anxiety, depression, excitement, and frustration. This may be the only realistic option when the source of stress is outside the person's control, like mourning the death of a loved one. For example, exercising, meditating, praying for guidance and strength, or journaling, are all ways of dealing with emotions without necessarily touching changing the source of stress.

## Resilience

**Resilience** is the process of adapting in the face of stressors in life and is often described as "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. Being resilient does not mean that a person will not experience difficulty or distress; it means that they can take on whatever comes their way. Becoming more resilient helps us to get through difficult circumstances. It also empowers us to grow and improve our life along the way<sup>2</sup>. Resilience can be seen when people with limited access to resources, and increased vulnerabilities bounce back better than we might expect, given their circumstances, and in comparison to others<sup>5</sup>.

While certain factors might make some individuals more resilient than others, resilience is not a personality trait that only some people possess. Building resiliency involves behaviors, thoughts and actions, which anyone can learn and develop.

These traits include working to improve more noticeable qualities like confidence, coping and self-esteem; and less noticeable qualities, such as doing better than expected on a project, or simply by being consistent. These skills can benefit anyone who faces adversity, disadvantage, or challenges<sup>6</sup>. Building the resilience of children with intellectual or other developmental disabilities can help reduce the personal, social and economic costs associated with mental illness among such children<sup>9</sup>.

## Promising Practices

Currently, most of the available resources and research focuses on the resilience of parents/family and/or caregivers of individuals with intellectual or other developmental disabilities, with very little actually focusing on the individual. One useful resource is the [Trauma-Informed Toolkit for Providers in the Field of Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities](#).

For more information about coping strategies and building resiliency, visit the [American Psychological Association \(APA\) website](#). This website has useful suggestions for controlling stress. Also, the American Institute of Stress (AIS) offers some [online courses](#) in this matter.

You can also find resources, and trainings to develop mental health care and supports for people with developmental disabilities on our website, [mhddcenter.org](#). The [MHDD blog](#) highlights personal experiences with building resiliency that might be helpful to review as well.

If you are aware of additional services and resources to support people with developmental disabilities building resiliency and developing coping strategies, you can contact us through social media or email us at [info@mhddcenter.org](mailto:info@mhddcenter.org).

## Contributors

Ivy Elmi, MSW

Teresa Larsen, MSW, CSW

## References

1. American Institute of Stress. (2020). What is Stress? Retrieved from:  
<https://www.stress.org/daily-life>
2. American Psychological Association. (2012). Building Your Resilience. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>
3. American Psychological Association. (2020). Stress relief is within reach. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/index>
4. Good Therapy. (2018). Coping Mechanisms. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/coping-mechanisms>
5. Hart, A., Blincow, D., & Thomas, H. (2007). Resilient Therapy: Working with Children and Families. London: Routledge.
6. Hart, A., Heaver, B., et al. (2014). Resilience-Building with Disabled Children and Young People: A Review and critique of the Academic Evidence base. International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies, 5(3): 394-422.
7. Taylor, Shelley. (1998). Coping Strategies. Retrieved from:  
<https://macses.ucsf.edu/research/psychosocial/coping.php>
8. Raghavan, R., & Griffin, E. (2017). Resilience in Children and Young Adults with Intellectual Disabilities: A Review of Literature. Advances in Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities, 11(3), 86-97.
9. [WebMD. \(2019\). What are the consequences of long-term stress?.](#)  
Retrieved from:  
<https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/qa/what-are-the-consequences-of-longterm-stress#:~:text=Ongoing%2C%20chronic%20stress%2C%20howe>

## Check us out on Social Media!

