



## COPING WITH TEEN STRESSORS

A stressor is any change that upsets the balance in our lives, causing us to make an adjustment. Stress is the physical or mental tension felt in response to various stressors, or events, in our lives. The more stress a person experiences in a given period of time, the greater the risk for illness. Stressors can also trigger depression and suicidal behaviors in some teens.

Studies have shown that approximately 90 percent of people who commit suicide have a diagnosable and treatable psychiatric illness. Unfortunately, less than half of these people were diagnosed or ever treated for their mental disorder. Studies also suggest that approximately half of people who commit suicide are under the influence of drugs and / or alcohol at the time of their deaths. Moreover, any sudden or chronic illness or traumatic injury can contribute to depression or psychological complications in children or adolescents.

A family history of depression, substance use and / or suicide also increases a child's risk for depression and suicide. Identified teen stressors include:

- Family stressors
- Peer / social stressors
- Self-esteem and sexual stressors
- Trauma / violence stressors
- Psychiatric stressors
- Medical illness
- Substance abuse
- Grief / loss
- Depression / teen suicide



## COPING WITH TEEN STRESSORS

There are two ways to cope or deal with stressors: in a positive / adaptive way, or in a negative / maladaptive way. Adaptive coping means dealing with the stressor effectively. Maladaptive coping means ineffectively responding to stress, often resulting in harm to oneself or others.

### **Examples of Positive Coping**

- Talking to parents or friends
- Exercise / sports
- Yoga / meditation
- Reading
- Problem solving
- Thinking positive / being optimistic / using humor
- Listening to music
- Hobbies / recreation
- Journal / writing
- Hanging out with friends
- Praying / religious activities
- Social support / asking for help
- Getting enough sleep

### **Coping Styles to Deal with Stressors**

There are a variety of coping styles that people use when dealing with stressors. The three most effective styles in dealing with stress are confrontive coping, supportant coping and optimistic coping.

- **Confrontive Coping**

While talking on her cell phone, Sara accidentally backed her mother's brand-new car into a light pole when pulling out of the restaurant parking lot. She is now faced with what to do about this.



**Most effective coping style:**

Confronting the problem head on or directly dealing with the problem.

**Least effective coping style:**

Avoiding / running from the problem. In this case, Sara may take the car to a friend's house and avoid going home for the weekend.

- **Supportant Coping**

Katie began cutting herself when she was 12 years old. When her mother discovered this, she took her to see a psychologist who diagnosed her with major depression. She began therapy and was prescribed an antidepressant medication.

However, two years later, Katie began feeling numb and stopped taking her antidepressant medication without telling her parents or doctor. She then began cutting herself and tried to stop on her own, but continued to be tempted daily to do it again. She didn't know how to tell her parents or doctor about it and just wanted to run away to show them how she was feeling.

**Most effective coping style:**

Asking for help. Katie had already been seeing the school nurse for some headaches she had been having at school. This would have been a good time to tell the nurse about how she was feeling numb and stopped taking her medication. The nurse could have helped her talk to her mom about the problem before things became worse.

**Least effective coping style:**

Trying to "fix" the problem yourself. Katie thought the medication wasn't helping her so she quit taking the antidepressant. After she quit taking the medication, she began cutting herself and tried to stop on her own. However, she continued to be tempted to cut herself and began feeling more depressed, as well as having thoughts of wanting to die. Her depression was getting worse.

- **Optimistic / Fatalistic Coping**

Tony, 16, and two of his friends decided to go squirrel hunting one Saturday afternoon. Tony's friend, Matt, was directly behind him when he saw a squirrel running up a tree. Matt took a quick shot at it and ended up shooting Tony in the right side of his skull and ear. Tony had massive bleeding from the ear and head. His friends rushed him to the hospital where he was immediately taken to surgery. Tony needed multiple skin grafts to reconstruct the ear and was in a lot of pain. He ended up with permanent hearing loss and a continued loud ringing in the affected ear.



**Most effective coping style:**

***Looking at the bright side*** – Tony realized he could have been killed or brain damaged if he had moved his head or body to the right when his friend pulled the trigger.

***Using a sense of humor (not sarcasm)*** – Although Tony was in a lot of pain, he joked about it. When asked by others what had happened, he replied, “Oh, my friend thought we were ear hunting.” Humor does help people feel better by causing endorphins to be released into the bloodstream. These are the body’s natural painkillers, which are also released during exercise. ***Thinking positively (or being hopeful)*** – For example, although Tony didn’t like the loud ringing in his ear, he was hopeful that he could find ways to adjust. For instance, he discovered the ringing wasn’t as noticeable at bedtime when he had the radio on. Another way to be positive is to have an attitude of gratitude. Tony was actually thankful to be alive with no brain damage, which aided in his recovery.

**Least effective coping style:**

***Pessimistic / negative thinking*** – For instance, Tony could be resentful about his hearing loss and constantly complain about the loud ringing. He could also think that his life has been ruined because of his impairment. Your body is negatively affected by each negative thought you have. It is important to challenge negative thinking or add supportive statements.

***Thinking there’s no way out, feeling hopeless*** – For example, Tony could have thought that he can’t live the rest of his life with this hearing impairment and, as a result, end up with suicidal behaviors. However, although you may not be able to get out, around or over a situation, you can always get through it. Often this may be with the help of other people.

## **Other Styles of Coping**

- **Palliative Coping**

Palliative coping is doing things to feel better. There are healthy and unhealthy ways of feeling better:

**Healthy ways include:**

***Eating a balanced diet*** – it’s important to eat at least 3 meals a day and to get enough protein in your diet, such as eating meat and dairy products. If you’re a vegan you have to eat a lot of soy, beans and nuts to get enough protein. One essential protein is tryptophan, which is needed to make serotonin (an important brain chemical)

***Keeping blood sugars level*** by eating complex carbohydrates, such as whole grains (e.g. whole grain bread). Also, avoid a lot of concentrated sweets for snacks, such as candy. Instead, eat fresh fruits and vegetables.



**Exercise** – your body releases endorphins when you exercise, which gives you a natural high and can ward off depression. You need one hour of aerobic exercise a day. The more physically active you are, the more conditioned your body is to handle stress.

**Journaling/writing**

**Relaxation exercises** – such as deep-breathing

**Unhealthy ways include:**

**Using illegal drugs, such as marijuana**

**Drinking alcohol**

**Smoking cigarettes**

**Engaging in excessive and/or dangerous risk-taking** (e.g., driving above the speed limit, self-harm behaviors)

- **Emotive Coping**

Emotive coping is letting off steam.

**Healthy ways include:**

**Crying** – emotional tears have stress hormones, so it's a good way to let off steam or stress

**Exercise** – doing exercise (e.g. push ups, jumping jacks, running, taking brisk walks)

**Writing out your angry feelings**- this works better than lashing out at people

**Venting** – talk out your feelings with a friend instead of yelling or lashing out at people

**Punching a pillow or a punching bag**

**Yelling into a pillow**

**Doing work that involves physical activity** - such as:

- Taking a throw rug outside and shaking the dust out of it
- Stomping on aluminum cans that are being recycled

**Unhealthy ways include:**

**Physical fights or hitting others** – try “talking it out” instead of “acting it out”

**Screaming and yelling at someone** – instead try:

- Talking in a calm tone of voice by taking in a deep breath and letting it out while coaching yourself to stay calm
- Writing angry feelings down on paper and then tearing it up and throwing it away
- Venting to a trusted friend



## COPING WITH TEEN STRESSORS WORKSHEET

1. What is a stressor?
2. Name 4 types of stressors that can contribute to depression and suicide.
3. What is maladaptive coping?
4. Give an example of adaptive coping.

5. What are 3 effective coping styles? Give an example of each.
  
6. What is confrontive coping? Give an example.
  
7. What is supportant coping? Give an example.
  
8. What is optimistic coping? Give 2 examples.
  
9. Give 2 examples (one of each) of ways your agency assists with “Surviving the Teens and Suicide Prevention.”

**Verification of Completion**

<b>Verification of Completion</b>	
Participants Signature:	Date:
Supervisor's Signature:	Date: