# Coping Strategies 1

## DIMENSIONS OF COPING

### Controllable and Uncontrollable

Individual differences in coping behaviours and use of resources determine to a large degree how stress affects you. The appraisal process is important in highlighting which aspects of the stressor are controllable and which are uncontrollable. We then need to be asking ourselves what additional skills or resources we need to manage those aspects that are at present uncontrollable, or to reduce their effect on our lives. Look at the below example:

Controllable and Uncontrollable Aspects of Stressors:

Stressor:

You have taken pride in managing IBD without additional medication, apart from at times of flare-ups, and now your specialist has explained that you should be prescribed an ongoing maintenance medication. You dislike medication, have fears about its overall long-term effect on your body, and feel that ought to be up to manage without.

Controllable: Discussing your concerns with your medical specialist, and asking for reading about the medication, and about the consequences of not taking medication

Seeking a second opinion from other medical advisers, support groups, the internet, and people who are using the medication already, and discussing all of these views with your specialist.

Uncontrollable: The fact of having an IBD condition

The current best practice about managing your condition

The benefits and side effects of the recommended medication

In the above example, the use of a problem-solving strategy (researching the Internet to focus on opinions contrary to your specialist, avoidance of your specialist, choosing to take the medication only intermittently without discussing this with your medical advisers) would have the short-term effect of enabling you to avoid the medication regime you were not happy with, but the cost of your long-term well-being given that the recommendation is best medical practice. In this case an emotion-focused strategy, discuss openly your concerns with your specialist and to be able to consider the recommendations and evidence in an open-minded way, challenging your previous thoughts and beliefs, is likely to lead to a better long-term outcome.

### Problem-focused and Emotion-Focused Approaches

There are two main approaches to coping: problem-focused and emotion-focused.

A Problem-Focused coping strategy involves dealing with a problem, or aspect of the problem that is causing distress. An Emotion-Focused coping strategy involves regulating our emotional response to a stressful situation.

* Examples:

*Problem:* I am invited to a social event at a time when I’m not sure if I will be able to manage it because of my IBD.

*Problem-focused coping:* I accept the invitation but warn that I haven’t been well and may not be able to make it at the last moment, and I make it clear that I will only be able to stay for a limited time, perhaps an hour. I plan in the event, thinking where the facilities are, and whether I need to take some spare clothes in case of a problem. I plan to arrive early so I can park near to the venue.

*Problem:* I am invited to a social event by a friend and I am concerned that I may not be able to attend due to my IBD. I have had to pull out of commitments with this friend on several occasions in recent months and I’m worried that she is taking this as a personal affront. I also worry that she may think I’m using my health condition as an excuse. At times I think I should just accept the invitation and persevere through, although I know that’s not a good idea, other times I think I should make up some other excuse, and as a result of this dilemma I haven’t called her for some time, and I’m worried she thinks I’m ignoring her. I feel it’s all too difficult and I just don’t want to know about it. Because of my indecision, I feel depressed, helpless and bad about myself.

*Emotion-focused coping:* I acknowledge to myself the various streams of thought leading to the confusion, and recognize the theme that I want to be a good person and not upset anybody, and perhaps also the theme that other people’s needs are more important than my own. I treat myself to a short relaxation exercise including deep breathing, and discuss with a friend or my partner words I can use to express what I’m trying to say to my friend in response to the invitation. I make some notes of the key points and practice saying what I want to say. I choose a time which is likely to be reasonably relaxed for myself and my friend, and then phone her, discussing my concerns about attending the event, and also about my feelings at having had to miss several of her invitations in recent months.



Exercise

Think of a stressor, either present or past, and consider the Controllable and Uncontrollable components.

Write your initial stressor and your analysis down.

Notice how doing this leads your thinking toward coping strategies. Write down coping strategies you could use for each component.

**Stress Monitoring Sheet**

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stressor** | **Reactions** | **Control Aspects** | **Coping Strategies** |
| A close friend has fractured their leg | **Cognitive:** what if they have nerve damage; what if they can’t work; are the doctors giving them best treatment; what will happen till they recover; will there be an ongoing disability  **Emotional:** worry, anxiety, apprehension, panic  **Physical:** muscle tension in the face, forehead, jaw, stomach | **Controllable:** need for information on current status, treatment process, prognosis; need to provide for support during recovery  **Uncontrollable:** it will take time to heal; provision is needed for time and expense of treatment; even with the best treatment there may be a residual problem; someone else will need to help them manage | **Problem focused:** Seeking the best information; asking the doctors questions; learning about the likely course of recovery; planning for help in the meantime; recruiting help from family and friends; learning about home help services.  **Emotion focused:** Talk with the friend, their family and friends; use the information from doctors to alleviate fears; use relaxation techniques |
| **Your Example** | **Cognitive:**  **Emotional:**  **Physical:** | **Controllable:**  **Uncontrollable:** | **Problem focused:**  **Emotional focused:** |