

Navigating Stress: Coping Mechanisms for Youth

This fact sheet was developed by Sarah Kheman, a placement student completing an Addictions & Mental Health post-graduate certificate at Humber College.

Coping strategies are vital tools for managing stress, reducing anxiety, and navigating difficult emotions. These strategies can be behavioural, cognitive, emotional, or active.⁴

Behavioural

Actions taken to reduce stress through physical activities and healthy lifestyle choices.⁴



Cognitive
Techniques that involve changing thought patterns to manage stress and anxiety.³

Emotional

Methods that are used to help manage emotions and improve mood.³



Active
Directly addressing the source of stress through proactive measures.⁴



Coping strategies can be **adaptive** (making changes to promote resilience and well-being) or **maladaptive** (providing short-term relief without solving the underlying problem).²

Maladaptive Coping Strategies

Maladaptive coping strategies can often worsen stress and anxiety, leading to negative long-term mental and physical health consequences. Examples of maladaptive coping include:^{2,5}

- Aggressive outbursts
- Social isolation
- Excessive screen time (TV, video games)
- Overthinking or obsessing over problems
- Binge eating
- Substance use (alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, opioids)

Substance Use & Coping

1 in 5 people living with anxiety report using alcohol to cope with stress.

1 in 5 youth in grades 7-12 who report vaping do it to relax or relieve tension.

Half of youth age 16-24 using cannabis for medical reasons do so to manage anxiety or depression.

1 in 8 post-secondary-age youth who use pain relievers non-medically do so to cope with stress.

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The Risks of Substance Use as a Coping Mechanism

Young people often turn to alcohol, nicotine, cannabis, and opioids to cope with stress, anxiety, or depression. While these substances may provide temporary relief, they can lead to serious health issues and an increased risk of developing a substance use disorder.²

Alcohol: Alcohol can exacerbate anxiety and depression over time, leading to dependency and other health issues.³

Nicotine (Tobacco/Vaping): Vaping can lead to nicotine dependency, respiratory problems, and increased anxiety.¹

Cannabis: Cannabis use can impair cognitive function, increase anxiety, and contribute to psychological disorders.⁴

Opioids: Opioid misuse can lead to overdose and severe health consequences in both the short and long term.⁴



Adaptive Coping Strategies

Adaptive coping strategies are methods used to effectively manage stress and improve overall well-being. These techniques focus on positive, proactive actions that help individuals adapt to stressful situations and maintain long-term mental and physical health.²

- Listening to calming music
- Talking to a trusted individual
- Journaling
- Maintaining a regular sleep schedule
- Balanced diet
- Physical exercise



Promoting Adaptive Coping in Youth

To reduce the risk of substance use, it's essential to promote adaptive coping strategies and provide supportive environments. Here are some recommendations for parents and service providers:⁴

- Enhance Family Support
- Encourage Positive Peer Relationships
- Educate About Risks
- Support School and Community Engagement
- Visit our **Parent Support Hub** to access our **Free 24/7 Support Service**.



References

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