

Healthy vs. Unhealthy Coping Strategies

Coping strategies are actions we take—consciously or unconsciously—to deal with stress, problems, or uncomfortable emotions. Unhealthy coping strategies tend to feel good in the moment, but have long-term negative consequences. Healthy coping strategies may not provide instant gratification, but they lead to long-lasting positive outcomes.

Examples of unhealthy coping strategies:

- Drug or alcohol use
- Overeating
- Procrastination
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Social withdrawal
- Self-harm
- Aggression

Examples of healthy coping strategies:

- Exercise
- Talking about your problem
- Healthy eating
- Seeking professional help
- Relaxation techniques (e.g. deep breathing)
- Using social support
- Problem-solving techniques

Example Scenarios

Avni has a research paper due in one of her classes. Because the paper will require so much work, Avni feels anxious every time she thinks about it. When Noelle distracts herself with other activities, she feels better. Avni uses the coping strategy of procrastination to avoid her feelings of anxiety. This helps her feel better now, but will cause problems in the long run.

Aman feels jealous whenever his wife spends time with her friends. To control the situation, Aman uses insults to put down his wife's friends, and he demands that his wife stay home. When Aman's wife caves to his demands, he feels a sense of relief. Aman uses the coping strategy of aggression to avoid the discomfort of jealousy.

Vinita is angry about being passed over for a promotion at work. Rather than discussing the situation with her boss and trying to improve her work performance, she holds onto her anger. Vinita has learned to manage her anger by drinking alcohol. Drinking numbs Vinita's anger temporarily, but the problems at work remain unresolved.

Scenario Discussion Questions

- What consequences might result from this individual's unhealthy coping strategy?
- What healthy coping strategies could be helpful for the individual?
- What barriers might be preventing the individual from using healthy coping strategies?

Describe a problem you are currently dealing with:

My unhealthy coping strategies:	Consequences of unhealthy coping strategies:
1	
2	

Healthy coping strategies I use, or could use:	Expected outcomes of healthy coping strategies:	Barriers to using healthy coping strategies:
1		
2		
3		