How to improve coping skills

Psychologists have found that we can all learn how to improve our coping skills and be more resilient.

Ten ways to build the resilience to deal with whatever life throws at you.

1. Problem solve

Try problem-solving. Work out what you need to do now to get over what’s happened to you.

Talk to people and think about taking practical steps, such as finding a support group. Sympathy feels good, and sometimes it’s tempting to be a victim and tell people how bad your troubles are, but problem-solving will be more constructive in the long run.

2. Keep calm

Try to regulate your emotions, for example by staying calm, rather than reacting violently with tears, anger or fear. Learn how to keep yourself physically calm and you will be better equipped to cope.

- Keep your breathing relaxed and deep to help control anxiety. When we feel anxious, our breathing often becomes quick and shallow. Inhale through your nose and breathe deeply into and out of your belly (not your chest).
- Stay physically relaxed. Exercise, warm baths and stretching are good ways to reduce muscle tension.
- Maintain a positive attitude when times are tough by visualising or thinking about something relaxing. Take a few moments to imagine a favourite place, floating in the sea or lying in bed, and you’ll switch into a calmer physical state.

3. Remember, it’s your life

Don’t feel that bad events or a dreadful childhood should lead to a life of problems. Many people survive troubled families. The majority of adult children of alcoholics do not repeat their parents’ drinking patterns, and the same is true of adults who have survived families troubled by mental illness, chronic marital problems, racial discrimination and poverty.

Some children naturally rebound from knock-backs with their self-esteem intact. If you need help doing this now you’re an adult, talking to a therapist can help.

4. Be proud of surviving

Something bad happened, but you survived. Look back and try to find things about what you did or how you responded that you can be proud of. Find your strengths and build self-esteem from them.

5. Develop insight
What happened? How did it affect you? Why did other people behave the way they did? How do you feel about it? What other factors contributed to what happened? People who ask themselves penetrating questions and give honest answers tend to bounce back quicker.

6. Use humour

See the funny side and you’ll cope with the situation better. Jokes have a way of making worries shrivel up and die. A good sense of humour is a great inner strength.

7. Be realistic, not dramatic

Another strategy which can help is to write down the worst possible result on one side of a piece of paper, and the best possible result on the other. The worst result of losing a job, for instance, might be, "I’ll be unemployed for the rest of my life." The best might be, "My next job will make me a millionaire." It’s common to focus on the worst possibility, but the best possibility may be equally likely.

End by writing down in the middle of the paper the real likely future: "I’ll look for another job. It may take a while, but in the end I’ll find something I’m happy with."

8. Get support

Resilient people tend to have strong family support systems and they seek and receive help from others when they need it (a teacher, a neighbour, the parents of peers or a spouse). Don’t be ashamed to talk about your problems and get help.

9. Don’t look for blame

Some people make the mistake of blaming themselves and thinking that what has gone wrong was entirely their fault. They then feel guilty and worthless and give up on things.

Other people make the mistake of blaming everything that goes wrong on somebody else. This makes them feel out of control, angry and unable to take charge of their own lives.

Resilient people don’t blame themselves for everything that goes wrong, or blame everyone else. They take responsibility for their own part in it.

If you’re blaming yourself, ask "How did other people contribute to this problem?" When you’re blaming others, think "How did I contribute to the problem?" This can help you see your situation more realistically.

10. Do something

Resilience grows by making something worthwhile out of painful times. Starting a support group to help others, or making something creative out of bad experiences such as writing down what has happened can help you express pain and get through hard times. Painting or singing are also creative alternatives of expression.