Realistic appraisals of life's problems

Coping effectively with life's problems and failures requires realistic expectations. Psychologists call these expectations and judgements 'appraisals'. Life events (such as traffic bottlenecks or the boss's gruff voice) aren’t a problem unless we appraise them as such. Life is never perfect and, to some degree, hassles and problems are a part of normal everyday life. If our appraisals are realistic, we're better able to react to day-to-day life events with a sense of proportion.

The appraisals we make are a product of our belief system. If we hold unrealistic, inflexible beliefs then our appraisals may not be the most appropriate for the situation.

Irrational beliefs often include 'musts' and 'shoulds', with an emphasis on perfection. 'I must be liked by everyone' and 'I should be competent and perfect all the time' are all irrational beliefs. They're difficult - if not impossible - to achieve.

Alternative appraisals

Is it possible to put an alternative interpretation in the place of an irrational judgement? Suppose someone treats you rudely. You may be tempted to think that that person is horrible, or 'everyone dislikes me'. An alternative interpretation could be: 'I wonder what's happening with that person for them to behave so rudely?' We have the choice of how to frame our perceptions.

In addition to these 'primary appraisals', it's important to develop 'secondary appraisals' when we ask ourselves afterwards if there's anything we can do about a life event we've appraised as stressful.

If we feel helpless to change things, or incompetent when facing challenges, then we're less likely to come up with a suitable coping response.

Self-efficacy

Psychologists have stipulated that people have different levels of 'self-efficacy' - which is the confident belief that the responses we make to life challenges have a meaningful effect. People with strong self-efficacy face problems with energy and a 'try, try again' spirit.

But how does this quality develop, and why do some people appear to have a higher level of self-efficacy than others?

Self-efficacy comes from life experiences and from people who serve as significant models. It's built up over the years by responding to challenges with action, flexibility and persistence.
Research suggests that we can increase the self-efficacy we bring to bear on our experiences by:

1. Living a life of goals. We can’t develop self-efficacy unless we succeed at things, and we can’t succeed if we don’t have goals to attempt and achieve. Set goals for your life, and give yourself credit when you achieve them.

2. Setting reasonable goals. Aim to set levels that are challenging but realistic enough that you’ll be able to reach them.

3. Finding good role models. A model or mentor doesn’t have to be someone you actually know, but they should be inspirational figures who demonstrate mastery.

4. Talking to yourself positively. Instead of belittling yourself for the tiniest faults, build yourself up for the smallest successes.

5. Remembering that it all takes energy and effort to succeed. Athletes know that you have to want to win and put in hours of training to make the mark; everyday life also needs that push to succeed.

**Successful coping responses**

Making constructive use of the network of people around you is a coping skill often forgotten by people under pressure.

Are there people you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk? Can you speak to them frankly, without worrying about what you say? And are there people in your life you can count on to support you in major decisions?

Studies have shown that people with a good support system are more successful at overcoming depression, maintaining self-esteem and overcoming loneliness.

There’s also some evidence that people boasting a good support system are likely to have fewer health complaints. The mere task of building your own support system is a coping skill, because it requires personal effort.

Being proactive - instead of passively waiting for things to get better - gives us an increased feeling of competence and self-esteem.