



How to Live: Protective Coping Skills

Finding a way to stop, or at least postpone, the act of suicide is essential to saving lives—whether the person is you or someone else. Yet, in the long run, *finding a way to live*, may be even more essential.

In a crisis, you may be able to find relief from unbearable pain. Meeting with a therapist or calling a phone counselor can be the first step toward getting what you need to survive, in that moment. Yet something beyond relief and survival may also be found. Even through tragic, irreplaceable loss, we may learn something about living that strengthens us for the future. We may learn to live more fully, through times of both grief and joy.

After the crisis, there may be time to step back and look at our whole life. We may discover we have specific coping skills--or ways of being in the world--that are diminished. None of us has a perfect grasp on all areas of living. Each of us may benefit from periodically reviewing our life and considering ways to change or deepen our presence in the world.

(This list has been adapted with permission from “Primary Coping Skills to Prevent Self-Destructive Behavior”—by the Link Counseling Center’s National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare.)

1) Self-Esteem.

Building self-esteem may be the most important element in dealing with day-to-day stress and periodic trauma. Developing a strong sense of self is possible with development of the belief that each of us is lovable, capable and valuable. For some, this may be a great challenge, but it is possible.

2) Communication Skills

As a coping skill, communication with others includes being able to discuss issues, acknowledge emotions and also being able to set boundaries when we need privacy or down time. Together, these are all essential for self-expression, connecting to others, contributing to society, and knowing and asking for what we need.

3) Relationship, Friendship and Social Skills

We are not born knowing all this. Each of us must *learn* how to get into relationships—a variety of different relationships—how to maintain them and how to end them, without being destructive.

4) Positive Failure

Many people are taught that the one secret to success is to avoid failure at all costs. But learning to survive failure, and even to benefit from it, is essential to growth and success. We can discover how to reshape our obstacles, setbacks and failures into learning experiences.

5) The Process of Grief Around Loss

It may be vital to learn that emotions are human and “normal”—even strong emotions that occur around loss and that may overwhelm people with their intensity. We can learn how to grieve many different losses. We learn it is a process we can get through. This gives us hope we can survive and, in time, come back to life.

6) Creating a Support System

To avoid loneliness and isolation, we learn to build a support system. Through friends, family, mentors, counselors and others we find resources in times of stress. During a crisis, our reflex is often to withdraw or push others away. Yet even if we are alone and feel hopeless, it is not too late to begin building or rebuilding support into our lives.

7) Stress Management

Each of us needs to find our own dependable approaches for dealing with both daily stressors and periods of extreme stress. Without coping skills, we may become discouraged and fall into despair and hopelessness. We may be susceptible to abusing drugs and alcohol or other self-destructive behaviors. We may lose aspects of ourselves and our lives that we cannot find again. Sometimes in a crisis, it helps to remember what worked in the past. At other times, all we know fails us. Yet even this may be an opportunity, however painful, to learn new ways of coping and living.

8) Making Decisions and Choices

Learning to make wise choices—at least choices we can live with—is an essential tool in daily coping. Gaining confidence in this ability helps us think creatively about alternatives and validates a necessary sense of our own power and responsibility.

9) Finding Meaning and Purpose in Live

Many people go through life drifting from one pursuit to another without any real sense of connection. Finding something we love, that feels satisfying—whether it is a career or a separate activity--brings great rewards throughout life.

10) Spirituality/Religion as a Resource

Sometimes loss shakes up our understanding. Without a sustaining belief, we may struggle to find a reason, or the strength, to continue through difficult times. We may see only one acceptable way of believing--which we have lost. Or we may search through a variety of religious, spiritual and existential possibilities for filling the void. Through

discussion, reading, or contemplation we look at our reasons for living, the meaning of life and death, our spirituality, our religious views, backgrounds and heritage. Some people find an answer or experience a return of faith. Others find the very process of searching renews their hope, gradually, over time.

11) Gaining Perspective through Laughter

Learning to laugh regularly—perhaps especially at ourselves, with love--is a gift which eases stress, softens heartaches and enhances joy.

12) Helping Skills

We learn skills of listening, reflecting, looking at alternatives, and when to engage external resources for help. These are essential elements of learning to care for ourselves and to provide care for others.

13) Anger Management

Many people come to terms with anger by seeing it as a natural and valid human emotion. We can find healthier, more productive ways of expressing anger and steering through its strong currents.

14) Impulse Control

Some of us are constricted and struggle to allow ourselves any spontaneous experience of life. On the other end of the spectrum, some of us respond impulsively, without due consideration of consequences. Most of us have probably had some experiences with both extremes. Learning ways to deal with all our emotions--that allow us both to live purposefully and to feel alive--can be tremendously helpful.