

CATHOLIC GUIDE TO COPING: PART 2

Stress

There is a specific process that our bodies initiate when experiencing stress. This process is good and designed in our bodies to keep us safe. One problem that presents itself is that the body doesn't have different processes for different types of stress. The same process that begins if we are confronted with a bear in the woods is the same process initiated if we are stressed about work. This process being activated too often and unnecessarily leads to significant health problems.

We are wonderfully made: Understanding the relationship between the brain & coping



Our brains are amazing. The higher part of our brain, like the stuff behind our forehead, takes care of functions like reason, logic, planning, telling time, and attention, among other things. This part can be called the high road. The back part of our brain, sometimes called the low road, provides functions related to our survival. Information about fears is stored here, our emotions are regulated from this part of the brain, and this part of the brain does not have a sense of past, present or future. The whole brain works together as an integrated whole, but when stress kicks in, the high road gives way to the low road and rightly so. Because it is the low road that sends information to our body so we can fight or run and survive! Because stress is just stress, and bears and unpleasant coworkers trigger the same processes, coping helps us turn the stress reaction off, and bring the high road online.

Being Proactive by Having a Coping Plan



Introducing coping during crisis is the least effective approach to coping...

If the low road takes the lead when stress kicks in, you are not likely to respond well to invitations to reason and logic during meltdowns. (The same goes for your children). How well has "listen to me", "calm down", or "tell me what's wrong" ever gone in the middle of meltdowns? Using coping tools on a regular basis and having an ongoing coping plan makes it much more likely that you will be able to cope well in crisis. It is like training your brain.

Your life of prayer and participation in the sacraments are NOT items in a list of coping tools and plans. They are the bedrock or the foundation. Your coping plan helps you live out your call in relationships well and make the most out of sacramental graces. This can also help teach our kids as we help them learn about virtuous friendships and behaving well in their own relationships.

Coping plans can include more than you realize. And there are Catholic things you are probably already doing, that help with coping. Praying a Rosary or a Divine Mercy chaplet includes a benefit called "object focus." As we focus our attention on the physical beads and the Gospel stories, this helps to quiet the racing thoughts that can come with anxiety. The old favorite of "offer it up" when properly understood offers the benefit called "re-framing." When we say "offer it up" we are uniting our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ, who transformed death and suffering, making all things new. The gift of being able to assign an intention to our struggles (for the souls in purgatory, for the sanctification of your children, for single mothers, etc) can not only give great spiritual merit to difficulties, but has great psychological benefits. Included is a list of examples of coping skills/tools. When you put your coping plan together, pray about it and decide what you will include and how often. Remember to begin with the sacraments, determining how often you will go to Confession (I recommend at least once a month), how often you will go to Mass (if you plan to go more often than Sunday), and what you will do for daily prayer.

EFFECTIVE COPING: EXAMPLES OF COPING TOOLS (BEYOND DEEP BREATHING!)

- Spiritual direction
- Counseling
- Bible study - there are great psychological benefits to sharing your faith experience with others
- Reading - spiritual books, non-fiction, fiction
- Community service - service projects, as simple as writing letters or making cards, up to in-person service
- Pen pal - picking a friend to exchange letters with
- Groups - topic based groups like parenting groups, grief groups, 12 Step, etc.
- Screen time limits - for all (adults need them too)
- Sleep hygiene -
<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/sleep-hygiene>
- Silence - planned periods of it
- Vitamins - there are some vitamins that also support improved hormone levels, as hormone deficiencies can impact mood
- Exercise & fitness classes - Crossfit, kick boxing, punching bag
- Stretching Pilates, using a foam roller, massage (chair, hand held, getting actual massages if finances allows - sometimes health insurance will cover it)
- Diet - having a plan for eating
- Cleaning
- Cooking/Baking
- Journaling - keeping a spiritual journal and jotting down a few sentences a day about God in your day, and experience journaling, what feelings you had in the day, gratitude lists
- Drawing/Painting
- Crafting - especially fine motor skill crafting like crochet or making rosaries
- Smart watch breathing apps, or setting reminders to stop and do 1-2 minutes of deep breathing 2-3 times a day
- Routine checking in with friends
- A sounding board friend - the one who tells you the truth
- Brief, repetitive prayers - ie: the Jesus prayer, Come Holy Spirit - these can be said regularly throughout the day

Outdoors

- Group sports - informal
- Walks/Runs
- Gardening, landscaping, mowing the lawn
- Building & chopping
- Swimming
- Kayaking/Boating/Just sit by the water
- Fishing

Coping tools for kids and when in crisis (like COVID-19)

- **Leadership** - Let your kids make some choices for the family on how the family will pray together, what movie the family will watch (they can pick from a list you've determined) - give them some leadership roles and this can help them find some sense of control.
- **Family rules for handling melt downs** - Admit that everyone is stressed and decide on a "what we do when we are at the limit" plan for the household; is there a place your child will go to calm down? Specific tools?
- **Make sensory bottles** - There are lots of instructions online for these. What is important is to teach your kids that they are a tool. I like glitter sensory bottles for calming down, when upset, they wait for the glitter to settle and then we talk about what's going on. Other types can help with just giving your child one thing to focus their attention on when feeling overwhelmed.
- **Identifying Feelings** - Post a feelings chart somewhere in the house - they are free online - and allow your kids to point to what feelings they are having that day, giving examples of experiences when they had those feelings (this includes playing High/Low each day.)
- **Burning worries and keeping blessings** - Everyone in the family can write worries down on strips of paper and go outside and share and burn them, and then write blessings on strips of paper and decorate a jar or box to keep those somewhere in the home.
- **Hug a stuffed animal (or soft body pillow)** - I tried this during guidance counseling once, giving each child a very soft stuffed animal to hold and cuddle for two minutes in silence. I was shocked! I could have heard a pin drop and they didn't want to hand the animals back to me. Give your kids a chance to do this, especially during meltdowns.
- **Be Active** - Send your kids outside, do activities that will make them move and run off stress - spray water at them, have sprint races, jumping contests, trampolines. If they cannot go outside, GoNoodle is a website that has dances they can follow along with to get them active (this also includes stretching.)
- **Build** - Encourage your kids to use their imagination and build with dirt, sand, or random things around the house. Create forts - make it a challenge (like Minecraft in real life!) Include puzzles.
- **Sensory objects and breathing** - Use squishy toys, bubbles or pin wheels to implement deep breathing.
- **Coloring/Drawing/Painting** - Practice fine motor skill coloring (detailed coloring pages) or making drawings of their experience.
- **Journaling (including reciprocal)** - For those who like to write, let them journal or write stories about their experience - you can add a reciprocal element by writing them back