



Learning Times

What Do We Know About

How Teenagers Cope With Stress

Recent events such as school shootings, the terrorist attacks, and economic recession have prompted attention to coping with fear and trauma. However, few parents and teachers realize that daily interactions are the greatest challenge to an individual's coping skills. This is especially true for individuals with learning disabilities. For someone with a learning disability adversity comes with every opportunity to read, write, calculate, or communicate effectively.

There is recent evidence to suggest that as children develop into teenagers their perceptions and ability to cope decrease for a period of time. The biggest decrease in coping skills shows up in boys and girls between 12 and 16 with adolescents at age 16 showing poorer coping skills than at age 14 (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000).

Up to age 14 teenagers rely on a mix of positive and avoidant coping strategies. Positive coping strategies focus on identifying the source of stress, seeking social support from others, working hard to achieve and solve the problem, working to improve relationships, seeking spiritual support or professional help, and focusing on the positive. Avoidant coping strategies focus on avoiding, ignoring, worrying, accepting undeserved blame, keeping the problem inside, or distracting oneself from the problem.

Avoidant coping strategies also include finding diversions to reduce tension, rather than cope. For more explanation on each strategy see page 2.

Around age 14 the types of coping strategies teenagers use shift, often showing an increase in avoidant coping strategies. Boys and girls show

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different preferences for coping strategies. Boys between the ages of 14 and 16 rely on reducing tension through physical distractions, emotional release, ignore or avoid the source of stress, and keep the problem to

themselves. Whereas girls seek social support, take responsibility for the problem, worry about what is happening, and begin to lose confidence in their overall ability to cope. Girls report feeling less capable of coping at age 16 than at ages 12 or 14 (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2000). Even though girls are more likely to use social support and guidance, they are less likely to seek guidance from professionals than boys; instead girls rely on friends, family, and siblings.

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Types of Coping Strategies

Seeking social support or guidance: attempts to seek guidance, support, information, or share the problem with others. We often think of girls going to friends for social support, but social support may also come from family, extended relatives, neighbors, mentors, etc.

Focus on solving the problem: attempts to understand the problem, alternative points of view, and the consequences. Individual breaks the problem down and tackles it one step at a time.

Seeking to belong: indicates caring and concern for one's relationships, investing in close friends, specifically working to improve one's relationships.

Work hard and achieve: a strategy focusing on working hard, commitment to achievement, internal desire to improve.

Social action: letting others know what concerns are, enlisting support through social action, i.e., fundraising, volunteering, etc.

Seeking spiritual support: seeking spiritual guidance through prayer, a spiritual leader (research indicates this is more beneficial to adolescent girls than boys).

Focusing on the positive: attempts to find the positive while accepting the reality of the situation, looking at the bright side, seeing oneself as fortunate, etc.

Seeking professional help: using a professional for advice, such as a counselor, teacher, or professional advisor. Boys over 16 indicate they rely on teachers.

Seeking relaxing diversions or physical exercise: reading, playing music, painting, writing, or engaging in sports to release initial stress and provide time to think. This strategy can lead to poor coping if continuously used to avoid a problem.

Ignoring the problem: attempts to avoid thinking of problem or reacting to problem as if it can't be dealt with.

Keeping to self: withdrawing from others and masking that anything is wrong so others don't see that one is concerned.

Self-blame: taking responsibility for problem, identifying self as responsible for being concerned or worrying. Self-blame can be appropriate; however, it ceases to be a productive strategy when individuals can't move past self-blame and use more productive problem solving strategies. For boys self-blame increases the likelihood of substance use as a method of escape.

Tension reduction: attempts to reduce tension to make oneself feel better. This usually consists of emotional outburst or humor that may or may not lead to problem resolution. Parents and teachers should help teens learn the difference between responses that are helpful from those that are harmful.

Wishful thinking: hope and anticipation of a positive outcome, taking a passive approach by letting time solve the problem, or holding hope that things will get better in the face of contrary evidence.



Let's keep in touch

We would like to provide you with timely news, information, and resources about LDA Learning Center and our services. Please provide us with your e-mail address, and we will send you updates.

Contact Emily Nordhus, LDA's Marketing Administrator at 952-922-8374 or email her at en@ldalearningcenter.com.

Thank you for your continued support!

How do I know my Teenager has Adequate Coping Skills?

Current research shows that the biggest stressors are conflict with parents, lack of parental support, conflict with siblings, poor performance and relationships at school, and few resources for support (Ebata & Moos, 1991). The consequences of developing poor coping strategies can have long-term impact on an adolescent's life. In situations where the stress is short-term, use of distractions, emotional forms of release and acceptance of a problem may be .

a healthy way to deal with the initial impact of the stress before moving onto more solution-focused coping strategies

However, when the stress is chronic, distractions, emotional release, not coping, and self-blame all lead to long-term problems. Teenagers faced with a problem they believe is not easily solved, is unlikely to change, or when the perception is that they do not have the emotional or intellectual resources to cope, are at greatest risk of using

substances to reduce negative feelings and induce relaxation.

In the long-term, use of avoidant types of coping lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, anxiousness, low self-confidence, willingness to engage in risky activities such as unprotected sex, substance abuse, or delinquent behavior. A parent can expect their teenager to use avoidant strategies initially, but then move on and use more positive coping strategies to deal with the problem as they mature.

Coping Starts with Accurate Explanations of Why Things Happen

We know that some teenagers have a difficult time making accurate explanations for why a conflict occurred. This is especially true for individuals who are aggressive, impulsive, or have social disabilities. In some cases they place the blame on others regardless of their involvement, while in others they are unable to see how their own actions caused the conflict. This applies to interpersonal conflict as well as poor performance.

If an adolescent is having difficulty understanding how his/her actions lead to consequences, keep these points in mind:

1. Inconsistent rules or implementation of consequences prevent a child/teenager from associating his/her actions with the outcome.
2. Telling a child to work harder or use a strategy will only work if the child/teenager is able to do so effectively. For example, spending more time studying will not be effective if the method is an ineffective strategy.
3. When the child/teenager uses only part of the information to come to a conclusion, help him/her look for disconfirming evidence.

Humans have a tendency to seek evidence that confirms their initial interpretations. Focusing on contradictory information increases our ability to see multiple points of view.

4. When the child/teenager does something well, reflect with him/her on what the result was, how it felt, what actions led to the result, how the result could be duplicated in a new situation.
5. When the child/teenager failures after increasing his/her effort, use it as a teachable moment. Take time to help him/her reflect on the strategy used. Failure to reflect on why he/she failed despite increased effort may lead to feelings of inadequacy, inability, and helplessness. Some teenagers can apply efforts that are self-defeating or ultimately ineffective. Parents and teachers who fail to focus on the distinction between effective and ineffective strategies will further undermine the association between effort and success. Focusing on why the failure occurred and what could be done differently in the future will help him/her to change his/her beliefs.

Teaching Positive Coping to Adolescents

Research suggests the most opportune time to teach our teenagers positive coping skills is between the ages of 14 to 16, with the optimum time starting at age 14. Parents and teachers should engage the teenager in reflecting on his/her coping strategies.

The key questions to ask are:

1. Under what conditions is a specific coping strategy effective and not effective?
2. What resources do you have or need to have to deal with the problem?
3. Can you use your resources or a strategy effectively? What alternative strategies could be used if the first didn't work?
4. When you used a specific strategy what went well and what could have been better?
5. What are the benefits and limitations of the strategies that could be used?
6. How can strategies like tension reduction, seeking guidance, keeping to oneself, etc., be misused?

Aside from providing reflection on positive coping strategies parents and teachers can use literature and writing activities to increase coping strategies. Coping and characteristics can serve as themes around which literary works are read and analyzed. The following works could be used to illustrate positive

coping strategies and lead students to relate themes to their own lives. For example, the poems "The Refugee Ship", by Lorna Dee Cervantes (1981), Amy Tan's short story "Fish Cheeks" (1987) or Michael Doris's novel *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1988) can be used to illustrate how characters adapt to challenging situations. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1953) could be used to illustrate the consequences of dysfunctional coping and problem solving.

Encourage the teenager to draw from the characters' experiences in solving problems. Narratives or journaling could include questions that stimulate discussion about what caused the problem, what coping strategies were used, and inferences of why some strategies work better than others.

Parents and teachers can use literature and writing activities to increase coping strategies...

References:

- Ebata, A. & Moos, R. (1991). Coping and adjustment in distressed and healthy adolescents. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 12, 33-54.
- Frydenberg, E. & Lewis, R. (2000). Teaching coping to adolescents: When and to whom? *American Educational Research Journal*, 37 (3). 727-745.



What's New at LDA?

New Program Director & Learning Disabilities Specialist Join LDA's Team

LDA Learning Center has named Victoria (Vicki) Weinberg as program director and Mike Anderson as learning disabilities specialist. Weinberg will oversee program operations and direction and Anderson will conduct youth and adult learning disabilities evaluations and provide consultative services to local schools and organizations. "Vicki and Mike are excellent additions to our staff," said Kitty Christiansen, executive director of LDA Learning Center. "They bring knowledge and expertise that will make our organization even stronger and help our clients succeed."

Weinberg has more than nine years experience as an instructor in higher education, special education and assisting children with learning and behavioral disabilities. She most recently was a lecturer at the University of Minnesota and University of Wisconsin, River Falls. She taught educational psychology and provided graduate level instruction on the psychological principles of adult learning.

Weinberg's career also includes serving as head teacher at the Red Top Meadows Residential Treatment Center in Jackson, Wyoming.

"LDA's programs use research-based techniques for overcoming learning difficulties," said Weinberg. "I'm looking forward to increasing the impact of our services through innovative programming."

Weinberg recently completed her doctorate in education psychology at the University of Minnesota and received a bachelor's degree in special education from the University of Northern Illinois, DeKalb, Ill.

Mike Anderson has 15 years of special education experience. He most recently worked as a case study committee coordinator and special education teacher for the Department of Defense Dependent School System at Patch Army Base in Stuttgart, Germany and at Sasebo Naval Base in Hario, Japan. His responsibilities included compliance review, staff development, assessments, case management and inclusion implementation. Prior to those positions, he taught at The Learning Clinic in Brooklyn, Conn. and Coventry Public Schools in Coventry, Conn.

"Learning disabilities affect people from all backgrounds," said Anderson. "Assessment is the first step in overcoming learning difficulties, and I'm excited to be offering my skills in helping youth and adults succeed."

Anderson obtained a master's degree in comprehensive special education from the University of Connecticut Graduate School and a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Connecticut. He is currently licensed in LD, EBD and MMI in Minnesota.

LDA's Summer of Success Program has been scheduled!



LDA's Summer of Success is for students entering grades 2-6 with learning difficulties or learning disabilities who may need to build fundamental reading and math skills over the summer. LDA's program offers students both structured, intensive reading instruction and basic math. Our staff uses research-based multisensory instruction for small classes of 4 to 6 students grouped by academic need and age.

Full day classes will be held Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Sessions will be held:

June 17 - June 27

July 15 - July 26

August 5 - August 15

Each session is \$695. A limited number of scholarships are available, based on financial need. Please call us at 952-922-8374 to register!

Make a Gift to Help a Child

LDA Learning Center relies on gifts from corporations, foundations, and most of all from individuals like you. Your contribution supports programs and services benefiting individuals of all ages with learning disabilities. Donations to LDA Learning Center are tax deductible.

- \$1,000 to provide training and coaching on LD issues to 10 teachers
- \$500 to provide a diagnostic evaluation for a child or adult with suspected LD
- \$250 to provide five hours of 1:1 tutoring for a child
- \$100 to provide school-to-work resources for five high school students with LD
- \$50 to provide reading materials for children at-risk of academic failure

Call Martha Moriarty, Resource Development Director at 952-922-8374 to make a gift or visit our web site at www.ldalearningcenter.com.

LDA is a private, non-profit, educational agency that specializes in helping children, youth, and adults with learning disabilities or other learning difficulties maximize their potential so that they and their families may lead more productive and fulfilled lives.

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