

Getting into a season of uprooting, tearing down, planting and building up: An overview of Healthy and Unhealthy Coping Behaviours



Jane* smiled throughout. She was recounting one of many painful episodes of abuse by her husband. The emotional incongruence was stark. The counsellor probed. It led to the discovery that Jane had been resorting to 'fantasizing'. She would retreat into her fantasy world of a better life with her past suitors, each time she experienced abuse, to cope with her pain. That explained her emotional disconnect.

Life throws at us many distressing circumstances. For Jane, it was managing an abusive relationship. For others, it could be losing loved ones, health, job, experiencing trauma, betrayal etc. These stressors throw our well-being into disarray. Whether we are aware or not, we respond, inadvertently, to distresses in one of these 2 ways:

1. Directly and consciously manage the stressors, or
2. Adopt subconsciously-developed coping strategies, like in the case of Jane.

The former is 'healthy coping'. The latter is 'unhealthy coping'. Jane's resorting to fantasizing is unhealthy. It relieved her stress, but only temporarily. It does not solve the root issue of her problem. In fact, she unknowingly mitigates the severity of the issue and sends confusing messages to the abuser and herself.

Hence *unhealthy coping is actually non-coping*. It is self-deception. We trick ourselves into thinking that we are coping. We often stumble upon the unhelpful strategy: a puff of a substance, an outburst or avoidance. Subconsciously, we feel we have hit on something that reduces our stress. Before long, it becomes a habit. Unknown to

ourselves, it develops into our default mode of coping.

Broadly speaking, these unhealthy strategies can be divided into:

A) The 'Moving-Away Strategies'. These are about withdrawing and escaping; physically, mentally or emotionally. Physically, we relocate or job hop, avoiding distressing people or events. Mentally, we escape into another setting, such as fantasy. We deny or dissociate, not acknowledging the problem or the need to attend to it. In extreme cases, emotional escapism may trigger psychotic episodes.

B) The 'Moving-Against Strategies' directed at the stressors. Losing one's job or being under someone domineering can cause us to feel a loss of control over our lives. We subconsciously wrestle back control by controlling others or controlling some aspects of our own lives. For some, it is through controlling our diet, resulting in Eating Disorders or Obsessive Compulsive Disorders. They give one a false sense of control. We may also resort to aggression; abuse or rebellion, often in passive-aggressive ways.

C) In 'Redirection', the stressors, instead of directly managed, are redirected to activities or some form of addiction. Some strategies include overactivity, seeking after false comforts in addictions of all sorts such as sex and sex-related habits of watching pornography and masturbation, gambling, smoking, substance abuse and comfort eating, etc.

When redirected at others, we call it 'Projection'. We project feelings about ourselves that we do not like onto others. For example, our inability to accept our lack of competence may cause us to be critical and judgemental of others' incompetence. When redirected at self, it manifests as self-afflictions; self-blame, self-harm, self-sabotage, etc.

All the above strategies serve the function of building a wall around oneself to protect self from further harm through numbing, distractions or avoiding distressing emotions.

This list of maladaptive coping behaviour is by no means exhaustive. It is also never as neat as it seems.

Connect-Point

Problems are not the problem; coping is the problem. (Virginia Satir)

Life happens. We usually have no control over problems we encounter. They challenge our ability to cope. Coping with problems in healthy ways is part of our growing journey. Unfortunately we often fall short of the ability to do so. We resort to unhealthy coping which creates more problems instead. The observation that 'Problems are not the problem; coping is the problem' is so true.

Unhealthy coping is borne out of our unhealthy beliefs. The most common ones are: 'We cannot handle it.' 'To allow our emotional distress to show is a sign of weakness.' 'Admitting to being overwhelmed by a problem is saying that we cannot cope.' and 'Admitting to being unable to cope is a sign of losing control.' So we end up suppressing our emotional distresses and taking control in all the wrong ways. We resort to, unknown to ourselves, relying on the unhealthy strategies we mentioned.

How do we know we have unhealthy coping behaviour? You will know it when problems do not go away. Our well-being is compromised and others are having problem with our behaviour.

What then does healthy coping look like? It may look different in different situations. These common denominators are present:- we face it, we own it and we find a place for it. In Jane's case, facing it means telling herself the truth about what has happened. 'The man I marry has an anger management problem.' 'I cannot cope on my own.' 'My husband and I need to seek help.' Facing it includes connecting with her pain. It is feeling, admitting to and connecting with the disappointment, helplessness, fear etc. Owning it means 'getting it' that there's no going back. Whatever happened is part of her story. If she wants a better story, she needs to consciously engage in healthy problem solving; seeking counselling, learning new ways of communicating and seeking emotional support. Finding a place for it is accepting and embracing it. This may include lowering her expectations of the relationship, assuming her responsibility of the situations, and when all else fails, accepting that giving up on the relationship may be part of the solution.



To face, own and find a place for what causes us distress requires courage and honesty and these can come only from a place of self-empowerment. Feeling self-empowered means believing rightly that we can still choose to act positively and make healthy decisions, even if we have no control over how things have turned out.

If having unhealthy beliefs is the root of unhealthy coping, getting into a season of change requires us first to become aware of our long-held unhealthy, unhelpful beliefs. Then can we begin to confront and challenge them. Admitting to not being able to cope, to feeling overwhelmed, or losing control is not a weakness. It is a reality that we must have the courage and honesty to face up to. We do not however allow them to cause us to feel shame, self-pity, self-condemnation and the hosts of emotions we then run away from. We must rise above them and believe that there is within us a reservoir of innate strength and power we can tap on and act from.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a first step (Lao Tzu). Get up and take the first step. Let this be a season of uprooting our unhealthy beliefs, tearing down the unhealthy coping strategies we have been subconsciously lured into. It may be running away from, taking control of or redirecting. Let planting of a new sense of self-empowerment begin. Let it be a time of building up courage and honesty.

**fictitious name*

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