

Coping

Thriving Series by MICHAEL GROSE




Parenting *ideas*
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12 essential coping strategies
every child can use when life gets hard

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First a few thoughts

Kids typically face many Hardships, Frustrations and Difficulties as they go through different stages of development. Pets pass away. Friends move town. Families move home and kids change schools. Children miss being picked for a team. Teens are left off party invitation lists.

How stressful these everyday events are for children will depend on many factors including their own spirit, the support they get from home and their coping skills.

Coping with Hardships, Frustration and Disappointments (HFD's), both big and small is part of growing up. Some kids cope with stressful or difficult situations better than others. They seem to naturally get by. Others need parental input to help them cope with seemingly minor situations.

It's useful to reflect on how you cope when life throws you curve balls. Healthy adults develop a series of coping mechanisms to draw on, often instinctively, when they experience stress or some difficulty so that they don't become overwhelmed.

It helps to share your coping mechanisms with your children. It's very reassuring for kids to know that their parents also experience and overcome difficulty.

Following are 12 broad coping strategies you can develop in your children to help them deal with normal, developmental Hardships, Frustrations and Difficulties (HFD's). These HFD's include: loss, disappointment, change, rejection, failure and conflict.

12 coping strategies

STRATEGY 1 Laugh about it

Help your child see a lighter or funny side of a situation.



Have you ever noticed that when there is a major world crisis or tragedy that there is soon a spate of jokes in the public arena about the issue? It didn't take long for September 11 jokes to spread through the Internet. These jokes help people deal with the anxiety caused by the situation. We are less likely to become depressed or feel helpless when we can laugh at a situation.

Humour is a great coping strategy. Encourage your kids to stand back and find a funny side to the situation they may be in. I am not suggesting that we trivialize situations, rather develop the ability to find some humour and hope in adversity. Humour is a powerful tool for resilience as it heightens feelings of control. It helps kids reframe a situation and gain some perspective.

This strategy requires kids to look for a funny side and not take themselves too seriously.

WHAT TO SAY: "Come on, laugh it off."
"Find the funny side."

STRATEGY 2 Don't let it spoil everything

Help your child to park his or her bad thoughts somewhere

The ability to compartmentalize bad events and keep them from affecting all areas of life is a powerful coping skill. Resilient sports people such as golfer Greg Norman and former cricketer Shane Warne have the ability to segment their lives and prevent disappointment (in the case of Norman) or personal issues (in Warne's case) from impacting on their sporting performance. Somehow they park their HFD's for a time, and they revisit these issues when they choose.

Similarly, kids can be encouraged to park their HFD's for a time so that they can function normally and then revisit them when it suits. For instance, if something negative happens at recess at school they need to make sure that it doesn't spoil their whole day. They need to think about something else when they are in class and revisit their issue later on.

This strategy requires kids to distract themselves, think about something else and focus on the job at hand.

WHAT TO SAY: "Park your problems for a while."
"Don't let this wreck your day."

STRATEGY 3 Get away from it all

Help your child take a break from his or her bad thoughts

My mum was an expert at taking my mind off bad things. When I was young I was upset when a neighbour's dog killed my guinea pig. My mum took me to a movie that afternoon as a special treat. She knew the best way to help me deal with this big shock was to get me out of the house for a while. The technical term for what my mum did is 'adaptive distancing'. My mum was getting my mind off things for a while.

When kids are troubled by events, or spend too much time brooding do something to get their minds off things for a time. Play a game, spend time together, have a treat, watch some TV, go out – do something different to distract kids. Teach your kids that self-distraction is a healthy thing and usually gives them some perspective. It also prevents them from replaying awful experiences in their head and blowing them out of proportion.

This strategy requires kids to 'blink' away their bad thoughts and distract themselves with something pleasurable rather than dwell too long on difficult situations.

WHAT TO SAY: *"Build a wall around the bad thoughts."
"Blink away the bad thoughts."*

STRATEGY 4 Get some help

Help your child talk about what's bothering them

A problem shared is a problem halved. Resilient people seek solace in the company of others when they experience difficulty. This is why social connection is such a strong preventative strategy for young people. The promotion of help-seeking behaviours is one of the best coping strategies we can promote. Even if kids don't overtly talk about what's bothering them, it can be immensely reassuring to spend time around others who are empathetic, understanding and willing to listen and help.

Some kids need help identifying who they can talk things through with – including friends, teachers and family members. It's also helpful to talk about how they can go about asking for assistance. Sometimes kids want to talk to others but don't know how to approach people so they bottle things up instead. Talk about the best way to open up dialogue with different groups of people.

This strategy requires kids to seek out friends, family and other adults who may be able to help them deal with their challenges.

WHAT TO SAY: *"Who have you spoken to about this?"
"Who can help you about this?"*

STRATEGY 5 This is normal

Help your child understand that he or she is not the only person to experience this

It's human nature to think that we are the only ones to experience bad things. But the human condition dictates that this is rarely the case. Everyone has experienced loss, rejection, disappointment and conflict in their lives. Rarely is there a situation so unique that you are the ONLY person to have experienced it. Normalising a situation is an aspect of optimism. When you realise that others also experience similar difficulties and survive you feel more hopeful.

Help kids to normalise a situation rather than personalise it. "You are not the only one to experience this" is a powerful concept for kids to grasp. It helps them understand that 'this too will pass'.

This strategy requires kids to rationalize their thoughts and not take matters personally.

WHAT TO SAY: *"Everyone feels bad sometimes."
"It's not just you. You are not the first person that this has happened to."*

STRATEGY 6 See the silver lining

Help your child to look on the bright side of any situation.

Optimistic people are able to find positive aspects in negative situations, no matter how small. This encourages people to feel like they have some control over situations and is the beginning of experiencing hope.

Help your kids see some of life's minor hardships as learning experiences. I am not suggesting you want bad things to happen. You wish they didn't happen but make the best of things when they do. Here are a few positive spins that you can find in most HFD's:



- ✓ **Learning something to prevent it happening next time:**
"You may have been unsuccessful this time but you know what to do next time."
- ✓ **Positive spin-off:**
"It may have been a boring party but you did meet a new friend, which is great."
- ✓ **Learning about yourself:**
"Maybe football, rather than cricket, is more your bag."
- ✓ **It's just this! Avoidance of something more unpleasant:**
"You may have wrecked your skateboard but at least you didn't get hurt and end up in hospital."

This strategy requires kids to change their way of thinking and consciously look for a positive aspect.

WHAT TO SAY: "Look on the bright side."
"What can you learn from this?"

STRATEGY 7 Hang in there

Help your child understand that 'This too shall pass!'

'Hanging in there until things improve' is an under-estimated coping skill. It is related to the notions of normalising, perseverance and acceptance of the situation.

Help kids understand that most situations will improve or at least don't seem as bad after a time. This is particularly helpful when kids experience change of circumstances (such as starting secondary school) and loss (such as a best friend moving away).

This strategy requires kids to tough it out and needs to be combined with getting away from things and getting some help.

WHAT TO SAY: "Hang tough!"
"This too shall pass!"

STRATEGY 8 Blame fairly

Help your child not to take things personally

Self-blame is one of the enemies of resilience. When you blame yourself for bad situations you think irrationally and experience loss of hope. It is important not to blame yourself for things you are not responsible for.

Most things that happen to you, whether good or bad, occur due to some mixture of luck, other people and your own actions.

Encourage your children to apportion blame fairly when difficult situations occur rather than catastrophise and personalize the situation.

This strategy requires kids step back and weigh up the facts rather than jump to conclusions.

WHAT TO SAY: "It's not your fault."
"You didn't make this happen."

STRATEGY 9 Accept what's happened

Help kids know when worrying is futile

It takes quite a skill to know when to worry and when to let things pass. Most 12 step programs involve the concept of acceptance. I try to keep this in mind when I am stuck in traffic – at these times there is nothing I can do so it is pointless fighting things.

Help kids accept situations that won't change. It is natural to want to bring back pets that have passed away or a friend who has moved away. There comes a time when kids need to stop trying to change things and just accept the reality of the situation.

This strategy requires kids to understand that some things can't change, but their thinking can.

WHAT TO SAY: "Go with the flow!"
"Don't fight it – relax and see what happens."



STRATEGY 10 Keep your perspective

Help kids keep a sense of proportion

We all catastrophise from time to time, particularly when we are under stress. It takes a cool customer to moderate their thinking the whole time. Catastrophising only exaggerates your anxiety.

Be mindful of your child's propensity to jump to the worst from time to time. A bit of reassurance is all that's needed in these one-off scenarios.

Here are five ways to challenge your child's catastrophic thinking:

1. **"What's the most likely scenario?"** Sometimes it's useful to introduce a dose of old-fashioned rational thinking. "Yep, you could break your leg if you go skiing. But the odds are that you won't."
2. **"Does it really matter?" "You may be right, but is it the end of the world as we know it?"** One way of dealing with hard core catastrophisers is to admit that they could be right, but even if they are right and the worst case scenario does happen, the sun will still shine tomorrow. Take kids to the worst possible scenario and they may see it's not so bad.
3. **"Where does this fit on the disaster meter?"** Catastrophisers get themselves in a knot about relatively insignificant things. Okay, making a fool out of themselves may not be insignificant to kids, however compared to plenty of other events... well, perspective is a good thing. Help them get some perspective by giving their worry a score out of ten, on how important the issue really is.
4. **"That's unhelpful thinking."** Sometimes kids' thinking is so out of whack with reality that they become anxious about minor things. Thinking such as, 'everyone must like me', 'I must never make a mistake' and 'bad things always happen to me' are extreme and need to be replaced by more moderate, realistic thoughts. E.g. "It would be nice if everyone liked me but not everyone will. It's important to have some good friends."

This strategy requires kids to step back and change their way of thinking.

WHAT TO SAY: "Keep things in perspective."
"Where does this fit on the disaster meter?"

STRATEGY 11 Be flexible with your thinking

Challenge black and white thinking and look for shades of grey

Watch your language to see if it's full of absolute, imperative terms such as: "I must...", "they should...", "they never..." If this is the case then you may be stuck with some very inflexible, unrealistic thinking that is causing you undue stress.

Today's kids talk in extremes – 'awesome', 'the best' and 'gross' roll off their tongues easily these days. Extreme language leads to extreme thinking. If your child talks in absolutes then let them know that their language can exaggerate a situation out of all proportion.

Encourage kids to moderate their language. For instance, they can replace "I'm furious" with "I'm annoyed", "It's a disaster" with "It's a pain", "I can't stand it" with "I don't like it". Sounds minor but by changing kids' language you change how they think about events and, more importantly, how they feel.

This strategy requires kids to step back and change their way of speaking

WHAT TO SAY: "Don't block off the possibilities."
"You could be right, but have you thought about...?"

STRATEGY 12 Let's set a goal or two

Help kids maintain hope by planning and moving forward

Ever been in a bad situation where you feel overwhelmed by events? You just didn't know how to get over, around or through a situation. This leads to helplessness and feelings of inadequacy. When this happens to you then you've just got to do something. Situations always feel better when you can get some action happening.

Help your child see that there are solutions to many HFD's but first they do need to do something. A poor speller can improve but first he's got to get a list of words out and start practising. Help kids set realistic goals and put plans in place to improve their situation. The plans need to be realistic – e.g. learn one new spelling word a day rather than ten.

This strategy requires kids to look ahead rather than look backwards and expect that good things will happen.

WHAT TO SAY: "What can we do about this?"
"Let's take the first step."

Match the strategy with the Hardship, Frustration and Difficulty

Here is a guide for matching each coping strategy with different hardships kids encounter. It is a guide only rather than prescriptive, so use common sense and practise empathy when helping kids use these strategies.

	CHANGE	LOSS	DISAPPOINTMENT	FAILURE	REJECTION	CONFLICT
Laugh about it	✓		✓	✓		
Don't let it spoil everything			✓	✓	✓	✓
Get away from it all	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Get some help	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
This is normal	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
See the silver lining	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hang in there			✓	✓		
Blame fairly			✓	✓	✓	✓
Accept what's happened	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Keep your perspective	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Be flexible with your thinking			✓	✓		
Let's set a goal or two			✓	✓		

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