

WHAT TOOLS ARE IN YOUR COPING TOOLBOX?

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YOUNG REVIEWERS:



ERIN

AGE: 15



AVIV

AGE: 11

When we face difficult situations, everyone has a different way of managing them. There are many things we can do to help ourselves deal with tough feelings or situations—which is also referred to as coping. Coping means finding ways to deal with tough feelings or situations. For instance, imagine getting a disappointing grade on a school project. You might feel upset and decide to talk about it with your parents, while your classmate might turn to their teacher and ask for a higher grade. Have you ever thought about why each of us responds differently to difficult situations? What exactly is coping, and what are some of the ways people cope? How do we learn to cope? Is there one best way to cope? In this article, we will tell you what scientists have discovered about coping. Matilda is excited about her upcoming field trip. Jamie promised Matilda that he would sit next to her on the school bus. As Matilda gets on the bus, she sees Jamie sitting next to someone else! Now Matilda feels sad. What can Matilda do to deal with this difficult situation? She could avoid Jamie. Or she could confront Jamie and try to get him to sit next

to her. What Matilda does to manage the upsetting situation is what scientists call coping.

WHAT IS COPING?

When unpleasant events happen in life, they can make us feel stressed. In turn, this **stress** can lead to negative emotions, like feeling sad or angry. For example, maybe there was a time when you felt upset with a friend, just like Matilda did with Jamie. Everyone experiences stress or difficult situations sometimes. Ups and downs are part of life! Since we cannot avoid difficult situations, scientists instead study what we can do to help ourselves get through these stressful times [1]. In other words, scientists investigate coping, that is, how we best manage difficult life situations.

To cope, we can use various “tools” to help us manage difficult situations. Just as a builder has a toolbox full of tools like hammers and saws, each of us has a “coping toolbox” filled with coping tools we can pull out when we need them. These tools are called **coping strategies**. When using coping strategies, we can either *behave* a certain way or try to *think* about the situation in a certain way [1]. Either type of coping strategy can help us solve the situation so that we feel better! When we find the tools that work for us, we can handle difficult situations better, maybe even without getting upset!

COPING STRATEGIES

What kinds of tools are in a person’s coping toolbox? Well, scientists have discovered many kinds of coping strategies, and these can be grouped in several ways. One popular way to group coping strategies is to divide them into three types: **problem-focused coping**, **emotion-focused coping**, and **avoidant coping** (Figure 1) [1]. You can think of these as three separate types of tools in your coping toolbox. Let us go back to Matilda and focus on one coping tool at a time, to make this clear.

One thing Matilda could do in her situation is to talk to Jamie and explain why the situation made her upset. This way, Jamie could understand Matilda a little better, and they could sit together and enjoy the trip. This approach is an example of a problem-focused coping strategy [1]. When using a problem-focused coping strategy, the main goal is to change the *situation* that caused us to feel upset. In other words, we try to solve the *problem*.

Alternatively, Matilda could turn to a friend or teacher whom she trusts, to explain the situation and how she is feeling. In return, Matilda’s friend or teacher could try to comfort her or tell her a joke to help her feel better. This approach is an example of an emotion-focused coping

STRESS

A feeling experienced when you are worried or uncomfortable. It can make you feel negative emotions or discomfort in your body.

COPING STRATEGIES

Things we can do or think that may help us to solve a difficult situation or reduce unpleasant emotions.

PROBLEM-FOCUSED COPING

Taking direct actions to relieve or solve a difficult situation. This type of coping may be useful when you have some control over the situation.

EMOTION-FOCUSED COPING

Trying to reduce the negative emotions you feel in response to stress. This type of coping may be useful when you cannot directly change the situation.

AVOIDANT COPING

Avoiding the situation and the negative emotions it causes. This type of coping may be useful when you do not want to (or cannot) immediately deal with the situation or feelings.

Figure 1

There are three main categories of coping strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant. For problem-focused coping, the goal is to change the *situation* or to try and solve the *problem*. With emotion-focused coping, the goal is to manage our negative feelings and change how we *feel* about the situation. With avoidant coping, the goal is to manage the situation and how we feel about it by *avoiding* the situation altogether.

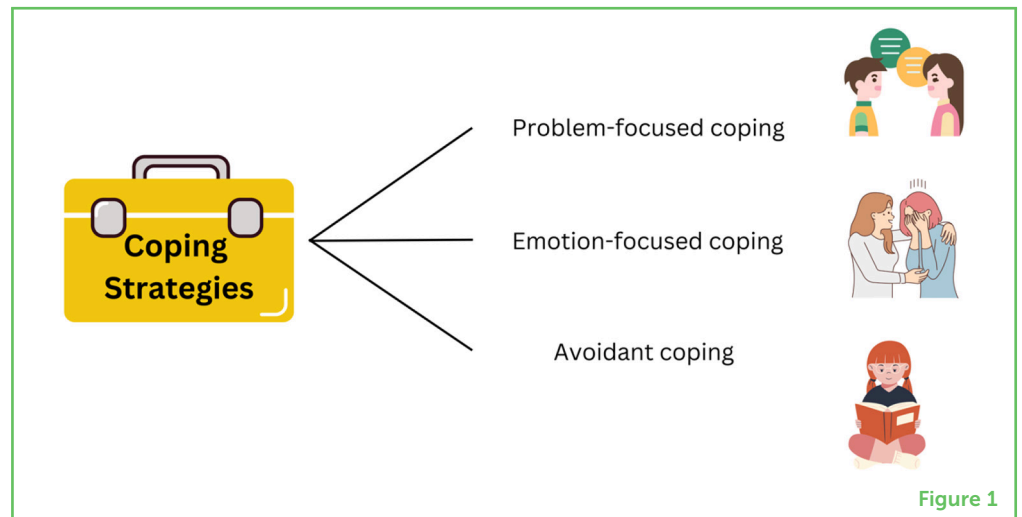


Figure 1

strategy [1]. When using an emotion-focused coping strategy, the goal is to manage our negative feelings. In other words, we try to change how we *feel* about the situation.

Finally, Matilda could decide to sit somewhere else and start reading a book or listening to music. This way, she could distract herself from the upsetting feelings so that she is less bothered by them. This approach is an example of an avoidant coping strategy [1]. When using an avoidant coping strategy, the goal is to manage the situation and how we feel about it by not dealing with the situation. In other words, we try to *avoid* the situation altogether.

WHERE DO COPING STRATEGIES COME FROM?

How do we choose which coping strategies we use? First, it is important to understand that the ability to cope with difficult circumstances is something that people develop over time. People are not born with toolboxes full of coping strategies. Babies cannot choose certain ways of coping. Instead, they react with the only tool in their coping toolbox, which is—you guessed it—crying [1]! As children grow older, they add new tools to their coping toolboxes. But how do we learn new coping strategies to add to the toolbox? Scientists believe that the way we are raised influences the way we cope [1]. That is, we might learn new strategies by copying strategies used by the people around us. For instance, if your relatives often talk about their negative emotions when they feel upset or angry, you may feel comfortable talking about *your* emotions and using emotion-focused coping strategies when you face a difficult situation. In other words, a person's upbringing and the people around them influence which coping strategies they learn and what they add to their coping toolbox!

WHAT IS THE BEST TOOL IN THE BOX?

Which type of coping strategy is the best one to use? The truth is, no single coping strategy is “the best” for every situation, or even the best for everyone [2]. The best way to use your coping toolbox is to learn how to switch tools depending on the situation and the solution you are aiming for! If Matilda does not want to let the difficult situation with Jaimie ruin her bus ride, she can try to distract herself by reading a book, or she can deal with her emotions by talking about the situation with her friend or teacher. This way, Matilda will feel better during the trip, even though she probably will not sit next to Jamie on the bus ride [1]. If Matilda *does* want to sit next to Jamie, then another good option might be to ask Jamie to come and sit where she is sitting. There is quite a lot to think about when deciding which tool to use in a difficult situation! As you might have noticed, it all depends on what you want or need at that moment. Luckily, our previous experiences of coping with stress can help us choose the right tools.

PLANTS ALSO COPE!

Humans are not the only creatures that use coping strategies. Believe it or not, plants also use coping strategies to manage difficult *plant* situations! Plants can experience stress from their environments, which can make it more difficult for them to grow or survive [3]. But what kind of stress does a plant need to cope with? Heat is one. Imagine a hot summer day. When it gets too warm outside, you can easily seek shade inside or cool off with a delicious ice cream. Plants, however, are not that lucky. They cannot escape the heat because their roots are buried in the soil (and they do not eat ice cream). Different types of plants use specific strategies to manage environmental stresses like extreme heat. For example, a cactus can cope with extreme heat by growing super-long roots that go deep into the soil, so it can absorb lots of water to keep itself cool. Palm trees keep themselves cool in extreme heat by using their big leaves to create shade for their trunks (Figure 2). Both cacti and palm trees can survive in extreme heat, yet they manage this tricky situation using different coping strategies. Just like people, plants face all kinds of difficult circumstances, such as too little water, too much water, or very cold weather. Plants must look into their toolboxes and choose the coping tools that work the best to help them survive in their specific circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Coping is how we manage difficult situations in our lives. Every one of us has a coping toolbox, which can include various types of tools, such as problem-focused, emotion-focused, and avoidant coping strategies. With time, experience, and reflection, we can add

Figure 2

Plants must cope with difficult conditions, too! Cacti cope with the heat by absorbing water from deep in the soil. Palm trees cope with the heat by creating shade for their trunks with their big leaves.

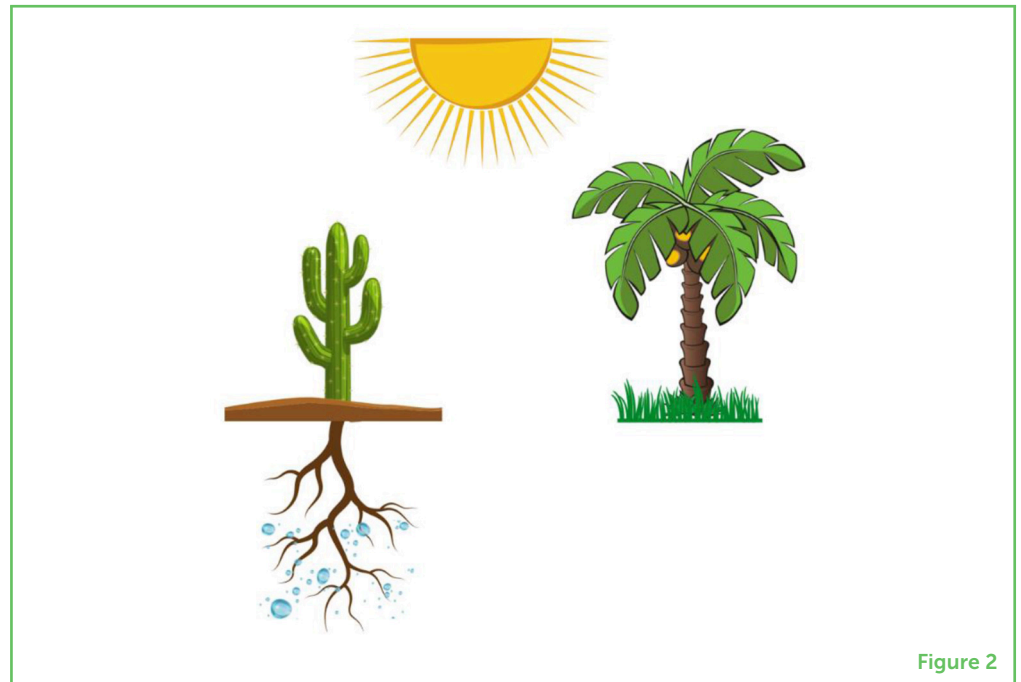


Figure 2

new tools to our coping toolboxes and learn which tools are most helpful for certain types of situations. Remember, there are no right or wrong coping strategies, but each strategy may lead to a different outcome. Finally, coping is not unique to humans—even our plant friends must find ways to handle their difficult situations. Coping is all around us!

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YOUNG REVIEWERS

ERIN, AGE: 15

Erin is an enthusiastic young scientist. She is eager to learn how to truly exercise the role of an active witness as a citizen in the STEM Realm. Erin received the Honorable Mention Certificate in the USA Biology Olympiad Open Exam. She was accepted into the Junior Academy and the 1,000 Girls and 1,000 Futures programs of the New York Academy of Sciences (Fall 2022) to further STEMism and play an active part in the Biology discipline.

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I have much to accomplish. As a 6th grader, I aspire to professionally perform in theater and movie acting. I enjoy performing arts, as I have taken Hip Hop, Contemporary, Musical Theater, and Drumming classes throughout the past 4 years. I enjoy learning about medical conditions, specifically mental illnesses. I am looking forward to more opportunities with Frontiers for Young Minds!

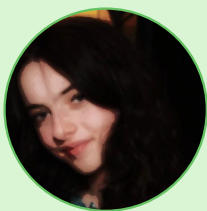
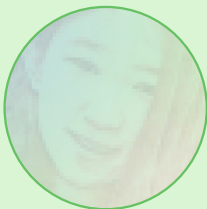
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Naz Kapoğlu is a clinical psychology master's student at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Naz has always been fascinated by psychology and discovering how humans, respond to and cope with events in their lives, and their patterns of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In the future, she wants to work as a clinical psychologist, as she believes that helping people in need and connecting with them is very valuable.

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Marianne den Hertog is an educational specialist at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. In the past, she taught at a primary school for gifted children and developed learning materials for students. Currently, she works at the Diversity and Inclusion Office for an Early Outreach Programme, where she develops programs to promote equal educational opportunities for primary and secondary school students.

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