

THIS WAY UP ↑↑

Helping You Take Care of Your Mental Health

Focusing on Solutions

In Tough Times



Focusing on Solutions

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One of the hardest things about going through tough times is the effect it can have on nearly every aspect of our lives - our health and the health of our loved ones, our work, relationships, and our day-to-day routines.

This means that we can be facing multiple challenges all at once, which can make coping and trying to solve problems feel difficult.

For example, although you might feel okay with working from home/reduced hours/sick leave, lacking usual social interactions, and being unable to do all of the things you're normally used to, might feel overwhelming!

It is easy to lose track of everything that's going on and to get stuck worrying about how we will tackle all of the problems we are facing.

When this happens, it is understandable that we might feel confused, scared, exhausted, and overwhelmed.

One way to manage how we feel is **to practise shifting our minds** away from every problem that might need our attention (both now and in the future) and **to focus on tackling one issue at a time**.

Another important aspect of coping with multiple complex problems, is to try not to dwell on how bad or unfair (or scary or disappointing) they are and instead, to use your mental energy on thinking of **helpful things you can do**, as well as **seeing who might be able to help you**.

1. Shifting your thoughts

When we get stuck in thinking only about the problem and how bad it is - i.e., being **'problem-focused'**, it makes it difficult to think of solutions and what we can do, or even the neutral or positive aspects of the situation. Instead, we can practise shifting our thinking to focus on generating solutions - i.e., being **'solution-focused'**.

For instance, if you're worried about financial stress, you could focus on developing a detailed budget or look for other sources of income such as looking for available job openings or applying for government benefits.

Importantly, this strategy isn't intended to dismiss or downplay your worries - it's designed to help you feel more in control of these challenges.

Tips for shifting your thoughts:

- **Notice when you begin to dwell** - think over and over again - on the problem and/or how bad it is or will be.
- Ask yourself **'Is there anything I can do about this problem right now?'**
- If it is a problem you can do something about now, try to **start thinking thorough a variety of solutions**. Be creative here.
- Imagine what you might tell a close friend if they came to you with this problem.
- If it is a problem you can do something about but not immediately, tell yourself that you will **come back to thinking about this problem at a later time** - you can even think of a specific date and time when you'll come back to thinking about this problem and make a note of it in your calendar.
- If it is a problem you can't do anything about, acknowledge how that makes you feel and try to **shift your thoughts onto something else** entirely, like focusing intently on the activity you're doing.

2. Focusing on what you can control

While there might be things outside of your control in your current situation, it is important to **keep your focus on the things that are within your control.**

While it's natural for our minds to gravitate towards issues that are out of our control, and we don't want to dismiss these issues entirely, spending a lot of time dwelling or 'ruminating' about things we can't control is likely to leave us feeling overwhelmed, hopeless, and powerless.

It's also common for people to think "Everything is out of my control" when they are facing challenging or uncertain situations.

However, thinking like this can also make us feel anxious and helpless.

To balance out these kinds of thoughts, try to **notice what things are in your control**, for example:

- What you think about
- What you eat for breakfast
- What you wear each day
- What books you read
- What you do to relax
- When and how you exercise
- What you watch on TV
- How you organise your space
- What radio station you listen to
- Who you follow on social media
- How often you speak with your friends
- How you spend your spare money
- How you talk to yourself
- How you manage stress and anxiety
- Whether you make your bed in the morning
- How often you communicate with your family

This is by no means an exhaustive list. In fact, if you listed every single thing in your day that you have control over, the list would probably be surprisingly long.

Noticing the things that we have control over can calm the feelings of panic triggered by unpleasant and unexpected changes.

It can also help you to be more mindful about what you spend your time doing (e.g., whether you choose to watch a calming or dramatic TV show), which in turn, can affect the way you feel.

3. Tackling your problems

Sometimes, it can be hard to think of solutions to focus on. This is especially the case when we're facing multiple problems or when we're feeling tired, stressed or overwhelmed. If you're struggling to think of proactive strategies for addressing any difficulties you're facing, try the below steps:

Define the problem you are trying to solve, as **specifically** as possible (e.g., instead of "I'm worried about money" try "In one month's time, I might not be able to afford to pay my rent").

Brainstorm as many solutions to this problem as possible. Don't try to think of the 'best' solution. Instead, list as many creative ideas as you can. Even if a solution might seem ridiculous, it may help you think of better ideas.

Evaluate these solutions by listing the pros and cons of each. Then, choose the best solution or combination of solutions. No solution will be perfect – they will all have a downside, but often choosing any solution is better than having no solution at all.

Make a plan for how and when you will implement the solution. You can break it down into steps and schedule them in your calendar.

Implement the solution you've come up with.

Review and repeat (if necessary) - take a moment to reflect on the outcome and see if you may need to try something else if the problem remains unsolved.

Tips for tackling problems:

- **Prioritise** what's important to focus on first.
- Apply the step-by-step strategy to **one problem at a time**.
- Try to **tackle small problems** as they come up rather than putting them off.
- Break larger, more complex problems down into smaller problems.
- **Talk through** the various solutions with someone you trust if you feel stuck.
- Try to **be patient**, especially when tackling longer-term problems.
- **Be gentle with yourself** and don't criticise yourself if you can't solve something.
- Use strategies to **soothe your emotions** if a problem you face can't be solved right now (or in the near future).

4. Being kind to yourself

Sometimes, feeling confident in our ability to cope with a problem (i.e., our self-efficacy) is more challenging than the problem itself.

It's not uncommon for people to have thoughts such as, "Everyone seems to be coping better than me," "I shouldn't be feeling so overwhelmed by this situation," or "I just can't cope."

Although this kind of thinking is understandable, it isn't particularly helpful (in fact, it often makes us feel worse). Instead, it can be more effective to use self-compassion.

Self-compassion is treating yourself with kindness and understanding. Self-compassion isn't 'being soft' or 'looking on the bright side'. It involves **acknowledging the difficulties of the situation** you are facing, whilst **seeing your own strengths and encouraging yourself**.

If you're not used to being kind to yourself, it might take a little bit of practise at first. You could try asking yourself the following kinds of questions:

- In what ways have I coped with this situation better than I might have expected myself to?
- What difficult circumstances have I coped with in the past?
- What qualities (e.g. resilience, my sense of humour) helped me cope with these challenges?
- What can I be optimistic about right now?
- What evidence supports me being optimistic about these things?
- What things have I done today that show me I'm coping?
- What is one thing I've done today that I can be proud of?

Another way to do this is to think of what you might tell a close friend (or your child) who's doing their best in a difficult situation - sometimes we can be more patient, generous, encouraging and supportive of others than we are of ourselves.

So practise treating yourself with the same kindness, compassion, and understanding as you do others.

The Done List and The Solved List

You can also try something called a **'Done List'** or a **'Solved List'**. A **'Done List'** is similar to a **'To Do List'**, but rather than listing all the things you need to do or all of the problems you need to address, it involves writing down all the things you have completed or achieved in that day and all of the challenges you've already overcome.

It's important to **write down both big and small achievements** – from making the bed to finishing an important work project. This strategy might sound simple, but it can help your mind pay attention to all the things you achieve in a day, which in turn, can boost your sense of confidence and control.

Use the space below to **list all of the things you've done in the past to adapt to new situations or previous tough times**. Make a special note of challenges you've overcome and things you are proud of yourself for.

5. Remaining Flexible

During tough times, the way you tackle your problems might need to look a little differently to how you may have approached them at a different time or in an ideal world.

Maybe a solution you've thought of a week ago can no longer be applied and you have to change your plans or postpone solving a particular problem.

Despite our best attempts to be proactive and cope in healthy, effective ways, we are bound to come across disappointments from time-to-time or need to learn to be OK with implementing less-than-best solutions.

Dealing with a constantly changing situation can very challenging, especially if you are someone who tends to like being in control.

When this happens, **try to remain as flexible as you can.**

Being flexible is about being OK with doing the best you can with what you've got, instead of continuing to set yourself high standards or aiming to do your job perfectly. This can help you feel less stressed when things constantly change and are out of your control.

You might not be able to do things the way you would've wanted to. Therefore, being gentle, kind and patient with yourself will help you protect your well-being during this challenging time.

Here are some things you can remind yourself:

- "I'm doing the best I can in this challenging time."
- "I may feel disappointed, but it is for the best."
- "I would've liked to do things differently, but this will do for now."
- "I trust in my ability to cope with the challenges that come up."



To access additional tools for coping with stress and anxiety during tough times, please visit our website.

https://thiswayup.org.au/coping_guides/



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