

## **Helping Youth Manage and Cope with Strong Emotions**

Emotional and psychological well-being is just as important as our physical health. Just as kids need adults to model and teach behaviors that lead to healthy bodies, it is equally important for parents and caregivers to help youth to develop skills to regulate emotions and cope with difficult feelings and experiences. Caring adults play an important role in nurturing a young person's ability to manage emotional responses and cope with adversity. This is especially important during a time when many children and teens are struggling with a sense of heightened stress.

Psychological well-being doesn't mean that we always feel happy or that we never go through hard times and experience difficult emotions. It is normal to experience disappointment, sadness, worry, stress, and feelings of not being okay. It is healthy for kids to experience an array of emotions. Sometimes those emotions are uncomfortable and hard to sit with, but learning to experience and cope with big emotions can build strength and resilience. Just as physical fitness takes time to achieve, developing skills for coping and managing emotions also takes time to learn and practice.

Experts in the field of psychology and behavioral health agree that all feelings are valid. There is nothing wrong with having big feelings, but how those feelings are managed is important. Self-regulation is a skill that can help kids and teenagers to understand and manage their behavior and reactions to feelings and things happening around them. Self-regulation can help youth learn that they can be in control of their emotions and learn to cope with their feelings in a healthy manner. A key to self-regulation is helping kids learn how to understand and accept their feelings. Adults can coach kids through this by putting a label on their emotion (i.e., you are feeling mad, embarrassed, disappointed, etc.) and then validate and relate to what they are feeling. We may not always understand why kids and teens feel the way they do, but parents and other caring adults can give youth acknowledgment that you understand they are working through some strong emotions and that that is okay. A second step is helping kids to understand that emotions and the way they feel in the "now" won't last forever. Developing coping skills to work through tough emotions can provide youth with a toolbox of strategies to manage feelings and handle stress.

Learning how to manage stress and deal with life's ups and downs is a process that continues throughout our entire lives. Helping youth develop coping skills includes identifying positive, healthy coping mechanisms versus unhealthy coping skills. Healthy coping skills relieve the intensity of the emotion, cause no harm to self or others and improve the situation. Unhealthy coping skills include things like verbal/physical aggression, self-harm, withdrawing or avoiding, excessive screen time, or drug and alcohol use. Examples of health coping strategies include:

- Deep breathing
- Exercise
- Practicing mindfulness
- Sleeping and eating well
- Engaging the five senses
- Journaling, drawing, coloring
- Sharing your feelings with someone you trust

- Asking for help
- Engaging in a hobby

Engaging in the following steps can help youth explore and develop healthy coping skills:

- Identify- What are things that bring the individual joy and comfort
- Practice- Engage in the activity/skill to become comfortable with it
- Implement- Use the skill in times of need
- Evaluate- How successful was I in utilizing this skill? Was it easy/natural to use? Did it decrease the undesired emotion? Did I like the outcome?
- Adapt- Make small or large changes to the skill; keep adding new strategies

Developing strong coping skills takes time and patience. Every coping strategy isn't going to work for every person and what works today, might not work tomorrow. Empower youth to practice many different strategies to help them explore what works best for them. If you think a child or teen is struggling to manage emotions or cope with difficult situations, it might be helpful to talk to a pediatrician or seek out help from a mental health professional to get extra guidance.

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Academy of Pediatrics; Boys Town; Child Mind Institute