

Some Ideas for Coping in Difficult Circumstances

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If you are coping in difficult circumstances, can you see if there are supportive options? Seek out trustworthy people to talk to—a religious counselor, health care practitioner, social worker, an ombudsperson—and/or friends and family. Can you build trustworthy relationships? Can you find a relevant support group? Consider some of the options below with a trusted person. Prepare *ahead*, in every way you can, for a situation you think will be tough.

- Set routines for yourself in getting things done, grieving for the difficulties, and getting as much sleep as possible.
- Take action, even small actions—between action and passivity, consider choosing action.
- Plan in small bits, if necessary—to get through the next week, the next day, or the next hour.
- If in doubt about truth or dishonesty, consider telling the truth.
- If possible, find something wonderful in your life (friendships, children, art, memories, music, colors, photographs, massage, taking care of another person or a pet or plants, whatever you have cherished.)
- Is there anything you can do to create or imagine alternatives to the situation you are in (plan a fallback position, plan an escape, keep thinking of options, keep weighing these options)?
- Exercise as you are able (dance, just dance in place, run, swim, bicycle, arm pumps in your wheelchair, whatever you can manage), in such a way as to raise your heart rate continuously for at least half an hour a day. Or for five minutes many times a day. Not only will you be more fit, but you may raise your endorphin level to help deal with pain.
- Learn and practice relaxation or meditation.
- Consider practicing denial or at least periods of distraction from grief or rage or pain.

LISTEN: Whatever happens, imagine that it is "data." Keep a journal, write poetry, or do any other kind of writing or composition that reaffirms your discussion with yourself, drawing on your own values. These views and feelings may be shared with a few trusted others.

- Develop a theory about what is happening to you, to help explain the experience. This may offer some possible sense of protection, a sense of being able to anticipate or predict what may happen next, a bit of control to dispel the fear of the unknown and sense of helplessness.¹
- Develop a sense of “humane stoicism.” Try to maintain a sense inside yourself of sturdy values and caretaking. Remember and *reject* the idea that “whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.” Try to avoid being forced into madness, bitterness, or rigidity.
- Use humor—it may help break up self-righteousness in yourself and others and may create a bond of sympathy in an otherwise rigid system, or with otherwise hostile colleagues.
- Do not tangle emotionally with people who do not have your best interests at heart. It will entangle you in their worldview and make it harder to maintain your own identity.

¹ These last five ideas are adapted from Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Originally published in 1961 by W.W. Norton & Co.

- Protect yourself in the ways that you can. And... never meet hostility with hostility.
- Reinforce your own identity and values to yourself, in every way you can, with friends and family and inside your own head—for example, “I am a fair person,” “I have been a good parent,” “I will be accountable,” “I have worked hard,” “I believe in my faith,” “I live for music.”

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