

**Coping**

Exercise



20 min



Client



No



## A Personal Coping Mantra

The content of our thoughts determines how we feel. For instance, having the thought “I am a bad parent” will likely lead us to feel something like sadness or disappointment. Thus, it makes sense that altering the content of thoughts will alter emotion. Indeed, this is one of the core components of cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT), the most widely researched psychotherapy to date. The thought “I am a bad parent” is a type of thought known as an automatic negative thought (AT). ATs are spontaneous negative thoughts that pop into our minds when we are in a difficult situation or experiencing a difficult emotion. ATs are often very judgmental and critical toward the self or the self in relation to the world. ATs, which have developed over our lifetime, typically reflect our core beliefs about ourselves and the world. Coping thoughts, by comparison, are “personalized, strength-based declarations about resiliency, history, or perspective that shift the client’s attention to help effectively navigate the difficult emotion,” (McKay & West, 2016, p. 199). Coping thoughts help people think differently and, in turn, feel differently about a triggering situation. This tool is designed to help clients learn about their negative ATs and replace these unhelpful thoughts with helpful coping thoughts. In this way, clients establish personal coping mantras, which they can use in future moments of distress.



### Author

This tool was adapted from McKay & West (2016) by Hugo Alberts (Ph.D.) and Lucinda Poole (PsyD).



### Goal

This tool aims to help clients (1) understand the link between negative thoughts and feelings and (2) replace unhelpful negative thoughts with helpful coping thoughts.

### Advice

- Inform clients that coping thoughts may be especially helpful after they have experienced and accepted a difficult emotion but are still struggling with specific ruminations, or while a repetitive, automatic thought is still fueling the emotion wave.

- Emphasize that clients must believe that a coping thought is true and realistic. If they do not believe the thought, it is unlikely to be effective. Thus, in Step 1, check whether clients believe in their identified coping thoughts by asking, “How much do you believe that this coping thought is true on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being completely untrue and 10 being completely true?” If the client rates his or her believability below 7, work together to modify the thought into a more believable one.
- Coping thoughts can be difficult to recall when in the throes of emotional distress in a triggering situation. Therefore, it can be helpful for clients to write down their coping mantras so they can access them easily when they need it the most. Work with clients to find the most suitable and effective way to keep their coping mantra with them in triggering situations. They might choose to write it down on a small piece of card and place it in their wallet or store it somewhere on their mobile phone.



## References

- McKay, M., & West, A. (2016). *Emotion efficacy therapy: A brief, exposure-based treatment for emotion regulation integrating ACT and DBT*. New Harbinger Publications.



# A Personal Coping Mantra

## Instructions

Stressful situations often result in stressful thoughts. For example, when your teenage daughter is barely speaking to you, you may automatically think, "I am a bad parent." Likewise, another setback at work may trigger thoughts like, "If I continue like this, I will soon get fired." Thoughts like these often result in feelings of distress.

One effective way to manage stressful situations is to bring a coping thought to mind. A coping thought is a thought that will help you shed a different, more constructive light on the situation. By bringing a coping thought to mind, negative thoughts are replaced by constructive thoughts, which, given our feelings that follow our thoughts, can drastically reduce feelings of stress.

Some examples of coping thoughts are: This situation won't last forever; This feeling will pass; I can feel anxious without reacting; I can tolerate this emotion until it becomes less intense; I can ride this emotion like a wave; This emotion feels uncomfortable, but it won't kill me; I've dealt with similar situations before; I am not my emotions; This too shall pass.

### Step 1: Replace automatic thoughts with coping thoughts

Think of a situation that often causes you to experience stress. For this situation, record an automatic thought that shows up in response to it (an automatic thought is a thought that pops into your mind spontaneously when the situation occurs). Then, come up with an alternative *coping thought* with which you can replace the automatic thought. See the completed example below.

#### Example

Situation: My teenage daughter is barely speaking to me

Automatic thought: I am a bad father

Coping thought: This is typical teenage behavior; it has nothing to do with my parenting skills

Situation:

Automatic thought:

Coping thought:



## Step 2: Guided exposure script

Practitioner script:

- Recall the stressful situation you identified in Step 1. Close your eyes and allow this situation to arise in your mind as if you were experiencing it now. Put yourself back into the physical space, noticing what you can see around you and what you can hear.
- Now tune in to how you are feeling at this moment. Notice whether any uncomfortable emotions have shown up in response to imagining this triggering situation.
- See if you can notice and allow the emotion to be there without reacting to it. In other words, see if you can welcome it rather than push it away.
- Wherever the feeling is in the body, allow yourself to sit with it. Be curious about the feeling, rather than resistant. Lean into it rather than away from it.
- Now, as you sit here with the feeling, let's think about that automatic negative thought that shows up for you in this situation. [*Practitioner recites the client's automatic thought from Situation 1.*]
- Notice what happens to the feeling in your body. Notice whether it changes at all, perhaps becoming slightly stronger or more intense. [30 secs]
- Now, let us bring your coping thought to mind to replace this unhelpful, negative thought. [*Practitioner recites the client's coping thoughts from Situation 1.*]
- Allow yourself to repeat this coping thought to yourself several times over the next little while. As you do this, notice what happens to the feeling in your body. Notice whether anything changes. [45 secs]
- Okay, great. Let's wrap up the exercise now. Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly as you open your eyes and come back to the room.
- Now, what was it like to sit with the feeling of distress?
- What was the effect of the automatic negative thought on the feeling?
- What was the effect of the coping thought on the feeling?

## Step 3: Establish a coping mantra

Take a moment to think about one helpful coping thought that can become your coping mantra. A coping mantra is a highly personal and meaningful thought that you hold close and that you can call upon at any time you need. Take a moment here - there is no rush; this coping mantra may stay with you for a long time. When you are ready, write down your coping mantra in the space below: