
Coping Skills

Below are some options for general coping skills to use with caregivers and children. Remember to incorporate other coping skills that you have used with clients in the past and that the caregiver or child has previously found be helpful.

Breathing: Take deep breaths from the diaphragm or stomach. You can place a book on child's stomach to see the rise and fall.

Music: Use a relaxing or lively tune. Have the child bring in music they like, but make sure it is appropriate (e.g., no violent or inappropriate lyrics). Play the music when they need it to self-soothe, but turn it off when you return to the therapy exercise.

Self-statements/Cognitive Coping: What can child/caregiver say to themselves to feel better? Tailor these to the individual: you are looking for helpful cognitions. Examples include, "I'm safe now; he's not here; It's not my fault."

Imagery: Look at and direct your attention towards picture or photograph of a beautiful and calming scene (i.e., beach, mountains).

Visualization: Have the child visualize a place they love or find calming and describe it as if they are there, using all five senses (e.g., the beach: what it looks like, how the sand feels, what it sounds like: wind and waves, salt water smell).

Relaxation: See two relaxation scripts included, one for older adolescents and adults, one for younger kids. For most kids, instead of having them close their eyes, have them focus on a fixed point on the floor. Practice in session and make a tape for kids to take home.

Stuffed Animal: Young kids can hug or pet a favorite stuffed animal.

Kids can create a "coping bag" with some of these items in it that they can take to school and use in session.

Grounding Skills

In addition to coping skills, kids and caregivers may need to use grounding skills to remain in the moment and decrease dissociation or depersonalization. Some kids describe dissociation as being “tuned out” or in a “dream-like state.” In these situations, the client needs to reconnect with the here and now, which is best accomplished by engaging the five senses.

Involve the child in adding options for the different senses categories. What can they bring into session, use at home?

See: Look at pictures (like in the coping skills above), describe what they see. Describe the details on a quarter, what do they see?

Smell: Smell something strong, oils, candle, cinnamon, anything strong.

Touch: Touch different textures, sandpaper, soft cloth, yarn, their chair. Can also involve feeling your legs on your chair, feet on the floor.

Hear: Tune in to therapist’s voice, music, any sound in the current environment.

Taste: Taste a strong flavor like a sharp mint (e.g., Altoid) or piece of gum.

Until the child has enough practice using grounding, the therapist should engage the child in experiencing the five senses by asking questions. “What does the mint taste like? What are you hearing? Tell me about the feel of the sandpaper on your hand, what’s that like?”

Mindfulness Skills

Below are some options for increasing mindfulness, or the ability to sustain concentration and attention on a particular activity, thought, or feeling that is in the moment.

Mindfulness also involves learning to minimize distracting (and often judgmental or negative: e.g., “I can’t do this”) thoughts, but not judging oneself when you cannot maintain attention. Notice that you had a distracting thought, but direct yourself back to the mindfulness task, like you would train a puppy (gentle).

Give analogy of mindfulness being like a muscle, and that it has to be developed.

M&M: Have client place a single M&M in their mouth. For two minutes, the client is to try and pay attention only to the M&M in their mouth—what it feels like (texture), tastes like—and when other thoughts enter their mind to direct their thoughts back to the M&M (without judging themselves for having been distracted).

Mindful Eating: Examine food (e.g., 1 raisin), watch hand move towards your mouth, take a moment to smell it, how body reacting to smell (e.g., mouth watering), how is food positioned in mouth? Begin chewing slowly, what tastes experiencing? When you swallow, feel muscles contract as you push food to your stomach, be aware of sensations (Can eat with non-dominant hand to increase awkwardness and increase likelihood you’ll have to pay attention).

Seeing Meditation: Fix your gaze on an object in your line of vision, take several deep belly breaths and glue your eyes to the object. Let it capture your interest as though it were the only object around you. Try not to judge what you are seeing or have any thoughts, “just see.”

Mindful Walking: Have the client walk slowly and carefully feeling their feet connect at each point on the floor. Without controlling breath too much, you can try pairing walking and breathing so that 1 foot touches the ground at each *in* and *out* breath. See how many steps seem natural to take during each inhalation and exhalation. Direct all attention towards the sensations of walking: you feet and lower legs. Which part touches the ground first? Pay attention to how your weight shifts from one foot to the other. What are the feelings in your knees as they bend? What is the texture of the ground (hard, soft, cracks, stones)? Differences in walking on different surfaces?

Counting Backwards by 3: Throw a ball back and forth with the client, as you take turns counting backwards from 100 by 3s.

Jumping Quadrants: Place tape in a + on the floor. The client has to jump between quadrants (clockwise or counterclockwise) on one leg, and then has to reverse directions jumping on the other leg when you say so.

Additional Activities Requiring Sustained Attention: Some mainstream games can be great ways to work on attention skills. Any game that requires attention to succeed will work, including: Memory (card matching game); Where's Waldo; Pictionary, Jr. (where players have to quickly draw a picture to illustrate a word in less than 60 sec.) that the other player has to guess; Taboo (players describe a word without using 'taboo' descriptors). Be creative!

Snap, Crackle, Pop: To be used with a group of 4 or more. The 1st person says “snap” and makes a corresponding gesture with either arm (a salute-like gesture; If done with the left arm for example—which then somewhat ‘points’ to the right—the person to the right of the ‘saluter’ goes next. This 2nd person then says “crackle” and makes another corresponding gesture (a cross the chest gesture with either arm, which again ‘points’ to someone either on the left or right hand side of the individual). This 3rd person then says “pop” and the corresponding gesture is to point at another person in the room (wherever in the circle) who then has to start the process over. Requires significant attention to know when it is your turn to participate.