

BUILDING YOUR COPING TOOLBOX

Everyone goes through periods of hardship and stress, and it's important to take care of yourself and have tools on standby to use when times get tough.

A coping toolbox is a collection of skills, techniques, items, and other suggestions that you can turn to as soon as you start to feel anxious or distressed. No one thing works for everyone, and it may take some trial and error, but building a coping toolbox is a great way to be prepared for those times when your mental well-being starts to slip – think of it as a safety net.

Creating your toolbox can be as simple as writing a list (on your phone or on paper) of what helps, like breathing exercises or going for a run – this way, when you start struggling with your mental health, you don't have to remember what to do or search for tips. You can also have a physical toolbox and fill it with things like a stress ball, written notes to yourself, and photos that make you happy. If you make a physical toolbox, it's a good idea to still include a list of (non-physical) coping skills that help.

IF YOU'RE STARTING FROM SCRATCH, HERE ARE SOME IDEAS:

Mood Boosters

- Read the story of someone you admire.
- Watch a funny YouTube video.
- Play with an animal.
- Watch a movie you loved when you were younger.
- Reorganize your room.
- Make a list of places you want to travel or things you want to see in your own town.
- Repeat affirmations. Saying an affirmation or statement with positive and personal meaning can bring calm. Pick something that speaks to you: I believe in myself. Fear doesn't control me. I let go of my sadness. I am safe.

Address Your Basic Needs

- Eat a healthy snack.
- Drink a glass of water.
- Take a shower or bath.
- Take a nap.
- Brush your teeth.

Process Feelings

- Draw how you're feeling.
- Make a [gratitude](#) list. Reflecting on things you are thankful for can help you change your mindset.
- Punch a pillow.
- Scream.
- Let yourself cry.
- Rip paper into small pieces.
- Vent. Venting is not the same as asking for help—it's taking an opportunity to share your feelings out loud. We do this naturally when we talk with someone we can trust about whatever is upsetting us. You can also vent by writing a letter to the person who upset you. Keep the letter a couple of days and then tear it up. Stick to pen and paper—using social media when you are highly emotional can be tempting, but you might say something you regret.

Volunteering/Acts of Kindness

- Do something nice for someone you know.
- Help a stranger.
- Volunteer your time.

Problem Solving

- Make a list of potential solutions to problems – it can help to brainstorm with a friend or family member.
- Make a list of your strengths. There are plenty of things about you that are awesome, no matter how down you are feeling at the moment.
- If a person has upset you, talk with them directly. Fill in the blanks to this sentence – “I feel _____ when (this happens) because _____. Next time, could you please _____.”
Example: “I feel left out when you make plans and don’t tell me until the last minute, because then I can’t join. Next time can you please invite me earlier?”

Hobbies/Stress Relievers

- Learn something new – there are tutorials for all kinds of hobbies online.
- Create – try a craft project, color, paint, or draw. Invite a friend to join you for added fun.
- Write – you could write a story, a poem, or an entry in a journal.
- Get active – dancing, running, or playing a sport are some good ways to get moving.
- Play a game or do a puzzle.
- Get a plant and start a garden.

Relaxation Exercises

- Practice belly breathing – put one hand on your stomach and start to inhale slowly. As you breathe in, imagine a balloon in your stomach filling up and continue to inhale until the balloon is very full. Put your other hand on your heart, feel your heartbeat, and hold your breath for 5 seconds. Now let your breath out slowly for 10 seconds – feel your belly flatten like a deflating balloon. Repeat this process 4 or 5 times and you should notice your heart beat slow down and your muscles relax.
- Try progressive muscle relaxation – clench your toes for a count of 5, then relax them for a count of 5, then move to your calves, then your thighs, then your abs, then your arms, then your neck.
- Play with a fidget toy.
- Go for a walk – feel the ground under your feet and the air on your skin. Focus on your senses.
- Find a [guided meditation](#) on YouTube.
- Do yoga – you can find videos on demand using your TV or online.
- Read a book.
- Listen to music, a podcast, or an audiobook.
- Unplug – turn off your phone, tablet, and/or computer for an hour or so.
- Use your five senses. Tuning into your sensory experiences can be comforting during intense moments.
 - Touch: stress ball, silly putty, a pet or stuffed animal, blanket
 - Hear: click a pen, pop bubble wrap, listen to a calming playlist
 - See: photos with loved ones, snow globe, affirmation/quote cards
 - Taste: sour candy, mints, tea
 - Smell: candle, scented lotion, essential oils

Ask for Help

- Text a friend.
- Ask someone to just sit with you.
- Call a family member.
- Call a friend you haven’t talked to recently.
- Call a warmline if you can’t think of anyone to reach out to.
- If you are in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK or text HELLO to 741741.

If you still feel sad, worried, or scared after trying to help yourself, you might be showing signs of anxiety or depression. Taking a mental health test at mhascreening.org can help you find out if you are at risk for a mental health condition.

If you are struggling or in crisis, help is available. Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org. You can also reach Crisis Text Line by texting HELLO to 741741.