

## Families and Communities



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# Strategies for Dealing with Life's Difficulties

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Regardless of your fame, fortune, or abilities, life is filled with difficulties. You get to choose how you will react to those difficulties though. Learning to deal with them in healthy, productive ways results in personal growth and peace of mind. This fact sheet outlines four healthy, effective approaches to coping with the challenges of life: eliminating overthinking, working from your strengths, taking time for self-care, and finding meaning in your experiences.

## Eliminate Overthinking

When problems arise in our lives, it is natural to focus inward as a way to try to find solutions to relieve the discomfort and unhappiness the problems bring. However, the more you mull over a problem or situation, the unhappier and more stressed you will feel, and you likely will not have found a solution. In addition, overthinking has been found to interfere with your ability to solve problems, sap your motivation, and sustain or worsen feelings of sadness (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

Stopping overthinking is a lot easier said than done. Here are five strategies (Lyubomirsky, 2007) to try the next time you are stuck in an overthinking mode and want to free yourself from it:

- **Stop the overthinking** – There are several ways to stop yourself from overthinking:
  - a. **Distract yourself** – When you realize that you are overthinking, find something fun (and safe) to do to completely divert your attention away from overthinking. You could go for a run, clean the kitchen, watch a movie, or hang out with friends. Sometimes getting up and going into a different room is all that is needed.
  - b. **Switch your thinking** – Think, say, or shout to yourself “STOP!” when you find yourself overthinking. Then find something else to think about that will not cause you stress.
  - c. **Schedule time** – Set aside 15-30 minutes each day to do nothing but overthink. Knowing that there will be a specific time for overthinking will help you to stop doing so the rest of the day. Right before going to bed or when you are anxious or sad is probably not the best time to designate as overthinking time though.
  - d. **Talk to a friend** – Find a sympathetic and trusted friend with whom you can share your thoughts and troubles. Sometimes simply voicing your thoughts is all it takes to clear your mind. Be willing to nonjudgmentally listen to your friend’s thoughts and troubles in return.
  - e. **Write it out** – Write out your thoughts so you can organize and make sense of them. Overthinking complicates your thinking, but writing down your thoughts allows the dust to settle so you can see what the real concerns are.
- **Replace worrisome thoughts** – True freedom comes in learning to replace obsessive, negative thoughts with either neutral or positive thoughts. Remember that hard things in your life do not determine your identity. Especially when you are in a negative mood, do not look for the cracks. Overthinking uses up your mental resources, making it difficult to concentrate on

other things.

- **Solve what can be solved** – Take a step—even if it is very small—toward solving the problems that were causing your overthinking. If you need to, you could write a list of every possible solution to the problem. Then think of someone that you highly respect and ask yourself which solution they would choose. Take action instead of waiting for something to happen. This will help you feel better.
- **Figure out your triggers** – Figure out what situations or people trigger your overthinking, and avoid them or alter the circumstances so they no longer trigger overthinking.
- **Look at the wider perspective** – Try to get a wider perspective of the situation by asking yourself if what you are ruminating about will matter in a year. If what you are overthinking about really is significant, think about what this experience can teach you.

Freeing yourself from the habit of overthinking will take some time and practice, so be patient with yourself. As you put forth consistent effort to overcome your overthinking, you will little by little start to see progress in your own well-being and also in your relationships with others.

## Work from Your Strengths

With very little effort, you could probably list your weaknesses and shortcomings. However, focusing on these imperfections does not yield positive outcomes. Instead, you should focus on your unique, individual strengths. Being able to identify these strengths and use them in appropriate situations can help you to feel good about yourself and with life. In addition, research has found that acting on your strengths increases happiness and decreases depression (Greater Good, 2017b).

Consider the following steps (Greater Good, 2017b) for taking advantage of your strengths:

1. **Identify your strengths** – Spend some time contemplating and making a list of your strengths. You could do so all by yourself, by asking a close friend or family member to help you identify them, or by taking the free VIA Signature Strengths test ([www.authentic happiness.org](http://www.authentic happiness.org)). Regardless of

which approach you take, create a list of your top strengths, as recognizing them is the first step in being able to take advantage of them.

2. **Reflect** – Think about how you could use your strengths to overcome the challenges in your life. Also consider how you can use your strengths in new and different ways than you have in the past.
3. **Set goals** – Pick one of your strengths and create a plan to use it as frequently as possible. You could focus on a different strength each day or spend the whole week focusing on one strength.
4. **Assess** – After executing your plan, take some time to assess your experience focusing on your strengths. Write about your experience, including what you learned and how you felt. Set more goals to continue working from your strengths. If something did not work so well, figure out how to change it so that it is helpful.

While it is important to work on improving your weaknesses, focusing on using your strengths can increase your confidence. As you focus on using your strengths, you will become stronger and better equipped to face the challenges of life (Greater Good, 2017b).

## Take Time for Self-Care

When challenges arise, especially when they involve other people, taking care of yourself can get pushed aside in favor of what seem to be more pressing and important demands on your time and energy. Especially when close friends and family members need help, it may seem selfish to take time for yourself. However, you will be better able to care for others and to face your own personal challenges when you have already taken time to care for your own needs (HRMET, 2013).

In order to best prepare yourself to take on the challenges of life and to help others face their challenges, make sure that you take care of your physical needs. Adequate sleep, good nutrition, and physical activity are all important elements. Caring for your emotional needs is also essential. Neglecting to care for your emotional needs can leave you feeling burned out. Regular self-care can prevent you from reaching this stage.

Try to incorporate the following two suggestions into your life in order to better care for yourself:

- Think of hobbies or activities that you enjoy doing, either by yourself or with others, that make you feel good and rejuvenated. Consider what it is about these activities that makes you feel so good (HRMET, 2013). Find ways to incorporate these types of activities into your daily life, especially when you start to feel emotionally tired.
- Take regular self-compassion breaks. Especially in the midst of challenges, taking time to be kind, rather than critical, toward yourself will bolster your strength. Consider including the following three elements (Greater Good, 2017a) in your self-compassion breaks:
  - Mindfulness – Acknowledge what you are feeling, without judging it as good or bad.
  - Common humanity – Recognize that everyone around you goes through rough times so suffering does not make you abnormal or not good enough in any way.
  - Self-kindness – Put your hand over your heart and encourage yourself to be kind, strong, patient, etc.

Although it may seem selfish, taking the time to care for your physical and emotional needs is actually very selfless in that doing so puts you in a better position to care for others and enjoy life with them.

## Find Meaning in Your Experiences

Stress and trauma are an inescapable part of life. Regardless of your efforts to effectively deal with the challenges you face, sometimes all that can be done is to seek to find meaning in the experiences as you patiently endure them, as well as come to terms with them after the fact. This process can lead to what Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) referred to as “a personal growth transformation” (p. 157). This can include a realization of one’s capabilities (especially the ability to endure), improved relationships as stress manifests which relationships can weather the storms of life, greater compassion for others who are suffering, and a greater sense of the meaning of life (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

The meaning of these personal experiences will be unique for each person. Finding meaning in these

experiences allows for physical and emotional healing to take place (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

One approach to finding meaning in your experiences is to take some time to reflect on the following ideas (Lyubomirsky, 2007). It may be helpful to write down your thoughts and feelings or to discuss them with a trusted friend, family member, or professional.

- Acknowledge the pain, suffering, and discomfort that you have felt as a result of your stressful or traumatic experiences.
- Consider what you did during these challenging times that you are proud of.
- Ponder how much you have grown as a result of these experiences.
- Reflect on how you have changed and how your relationships with others have changed.
- Think about how the trauma and stress can create:
  - Greater mental toughness
  - Deeper relationships
  - Increased awareness
  - New perspectives
  - A better appreciation for life
  - A greater sense of meaning
  - Strengthened priorities

Traumatic and stressful events can threaten your self-worth and your dreams. For this reason, coping may require being able to rethink your assumptions and beliefs about life. As you seek to find meaning in your experiences, intrusive thoughts about the experience will decrease and you will be able to accept what has happened or is currently happening in order to move forward (Lyubomirsky, 2007).

## Conclusion

Challenges in life are inevitable. However, as you seek to understand and apply healthy ways of coping, such as eliminating overthinking, working from your strengths, taking time for self-care, and finding meaning in your experiences, you will be more prepared to face these challenges with peace and confidence.

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