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HELPFUL VS. HARMFUL: WAYS TO MANAGE EMOTIONS

Content warning: This article mentions topics such as suicide, self-harm, and substance use.

Negative emotions like fear, sadness, and anger are a basic part of life and sometimes we struggle with how to deal with them effectively. We often learn how to manage or cope with emotions from the environments we are in and the people we are around. Some of the coping styles we learn may be more helpful, while others may be more harmful.



SOME OF THE HARMFUL WAYS THAT PEOPLE DEAL WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS ARE:

Denial

Denial is when a person ignores their feelings or does not accept that they are dealing with a challenging situation. They may do this if the situation does not seem like a big deal or if they feel they need to prioritize other things, like work or school. When people deny their feelings, those feelings don't just go away and can build up over time. This can lead to a person "exploding" or acting out in a harmful way.

Withdrawal

Withdrawal is when a person doesn't want to be around, or participate in, activities with, other people. This is different from wanting to be alone from time to time, and can be a warning sign of depression. Some people may withdraw because being around others takes too much energy, or they feel overwhelmed. This can be especially true for many neurodivergent people who need alone time in order to recharge their social and sensory batteries. In this case, taking "me time" is a helpful coping tool for keeping you healthy.

This is different from someone withdrawing because they don't think other people like them. People also may withdraw if they have behaviors that they are ashamed of so other people don't find out about what they are doing.

But withdrawal brings its own problems: extreme loneliness, misunderstanding, anger, and distorted thinking. We need to interact with other people to keep us balanced.

Aggression

Aggression is when a person uses force, threats, or ridicule to show power over others. People typically take part in aggressive behavior because they don't feel good about themselves or are taking their emotions out on someone else. Making someone else feel bad makes them feel better about themselves or feel less alone. This can also show up as bullying or cyberbullying on online forums where the person can remain anonymous. This behavior is harmful to both the bully and the person being bullied, and does not address underlying issues.

Self-harm

Self-harm can take many forms including: cutting, starving oneself, bingeing and purging, or participating in dangerous behavior. Even though this causes the person physical pain, many people self-harm because they feel like it gives them control over emotional pain. While self-harming may bring temporary relief, these behaviors can become addictive and can eventually lead people to feel more out of control and in greater pain than ever.

Substance use

Substance use is when people turn to alcohol and other drugs to make themselves feel better or numb about painful emotions or situations. Alcohol and drug use can damage the brain, making it need higher amounts of substances to get the same effect. Over time, this can lead people to feel they need to use substances in order to feel "normal," especially if there are emotions that have never been properly dealt with that underlie their substance use. They may eventually feel desperate that this habit has gotten out of control, which can lead to suicidal thoughts.

Substance use and [overdose-related deaths have been on the rise since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Stress about health, finances, and social isolation led people to use substances to cope.

With practice, everyone can learn how to manage their emotions in healthy ways and many people find it helpful to [work with a therapist](#). You can also work on trying to cope in healthier ways on your own. Learn more from MHA's [Building Your Coping Toolbox article](#).

If you're working on improving your coping skills, but still find yourself struggling to deal with emotions, you might be showing the early warning signs of a mental health or substance use condition.

Visit mhascreening.org to take an anonymous, free, and private mental health test. It only takes a few minutes, and after you are finished you will be given information about the next steps you should take based on the results.

If you or someone you know is 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.