

The Skills You Need to Prevent Regain

When you've developed positive coping skills it is easier to stay motivated and on track with the consistent eating and exercise habits that are so important to maintaining a healthy weight. When life gets challenging it is natural to gravitate towards old comfortable habits that may not support a healthy weight. Practice positive coping skills ahead of time so that you are ready for the challenges ahead. When a challenge presents itself, you'll have the skills you need to stay on track.



We all have different ways of coping when life throws us a curve. Big life changes can bring on feelings of anxiety, depression and frustration. Some of our default coping strategies, like overeating or drinking too much alcohol, provide quick relief, but may end up derailing the positive habits we've put in place to support a healthy weight. Healthy coping, on the other hand, helps us to both manage the stress and maintain weight loss long term. And, the good news is, healthy coping skills can be developed to deal with stressful situations, get through tough times, and even eliminate stressful situations.

Different Types of Coping Skills

Coping skills tend to be proactive, emotion-regulating, or problem-solving in focus. Sometimes a combination of different approaches works even better than a single approach. Keep in mind that what works well for one person or situation may not work for another. Trying and practicing different skills in a variety of situations is a good way to build your toolbox so that you're best able to handle the next curve that comes your way.

Proactive Coping Skills

Coping skills are often thought of as reactive—you're stressed so you use a strategy to cope. Being proactive, however, can help us manage obstacles sure to come our way. Instead of defaulting to not-so-healthy behaviors when confronted by overwhelming stress, we may be able to eliminate the situation from feeling stressful at all. With a little foresight and planning, some stressors, like not having the right foods on hand or being tired from staying up too late watching TV, may be totally under our control.

By being proactive, we keep distress to a minimum, and improve the likelihood we will be able follow through with healthy behaviors. Here are proactive skills you can use to keep your healthy lifestyle on track.

Special Occasions. Have a plan for the temptations and emotions that are associated with special occasions. It may be a holiday party, a wedding reception, dinner at the in-laws, a business trip, or your birthday celebration—whatever the occasion, a proactive plan will help you make better decisions. What will the temptations be for you? How will emotions play into the occasion? Is there a way to “treat” while still sticking to your plan? Have you successfully navigated a similar situation-- what worked or didn't work for you? These are all important questions to ponder as you think through the strategies and attitudes that will best serve you.

Triggers. Specific situations or triggers tend to lead to poor food choices or grazing. You know when you're prone to these behaviors. Make a plan—pay for the gas at the pump, avoid driving by your favorite fast food restaurant, keep the candy out of the house, chew gum while you watch TV, watch less TV, put healthy foods in plain sight, or keep your hands busy.



Have Healthy Food Available. Plan, shop, prep, and take food with you. Having the right foods at your fingertips makes eating right easy. Even if life throws a big curve, you can grab a little cooler and pack it with a cheese stick, yogurt, a 100-calorie pack of nuts, and ready-to-drink protein shake and you're good for several hours.

Structure and Routine. Structure and routine allow you to put many decisions on autopilot.

Like brushing your teeth and taking a shower, it just happens. Fewer decisions equal less stress. Get in a groove and pack lunch/snacks evening before, shop on Wednesday evenings, meal plan and prep on Sunday early afternoon, etc.

Adequate Sleep. A lack of sleep increases the cravings for carb-rich foods and weakens our resolve to eat right and move more. Set up good sleep habits and routines so you're well rested, experience less stress and are better able to confront the stress that you do have.

Self-Monitoring. Research is clear that people who write down what they eat in a daily log are more successful at losing weight. This simple act makes you aware of everything you eat. If your weight begins to creep up, this is the first place to look for clues as to what is going on. Chances are that little extras are sneaking back into your diet. When you find an area that needs improvement—problem-solving or emotion-regulating coping skills are helpful.

Get Support. A good support network of people who understand your circumstances can help to keep you accountable. A great therapist can be invaluable as well.

Stay Active. Boredom is not your friend. Physical activities can reduce stress and social activities can help us meet our emotional needs without resorting to unhealthy eating.

Problem Solving Skills

If you are unable to avoid a stressful situation by being proactive, then you need to decide if the situation calls for a better way to cope with your emotions about the situation or a change to the situation itself. Problem solving skills are most helpful when it is the situation that needs changing.

Increased confidence that often accompanies weight loss can help bolster a person's ability to using problem solving skills to eliminate stressful situations. For example, rather than soothing your emotions when another person puts you down repeatedly, it may be time to sever ties and end the stressful situation altogether.



Other types of problem solving skills include improving time management, establishing healthy relationship boundaries, asking for support, walking away from a stressful situation, creating a step-by-step plan to accomplish a goal, obtaining job training and working on self-development skills that can help you move out of a situation that causes you stress.

One problem-solving strategy involves writing down the problem and as many potential solutions you can think of. Then evaluate each potential solution to come up with a game plan. Break the plan down into individual steps: what will be done, how will it be done, when will it be done, who will do it and where will it take place.

Finding solutions to stressful situations helps you to feel in control and boosts the confidence that you will be able to solve additional problems that arise. Problems themselves no longer have the same level of stress as this confidence builds.

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Emotion Regulating Skills

Emotion regulating skills are helpful to take care of your feelings when you don't want to or are unable to change the situation itself. For example, when going through a health crisis (yours or someone close to you), using emotion regulating skills can help you take care of your feelings in a healthy way. These coping skills can help you, 1) Accept your feelings and allow yourself to feel them without numbing or distracting, 2) help you change your mood or calm down, or 3) temporarily distract yourself until the distress is at a level you are better able to cope with.

It's important to figure out what is going on emotionally while snacking, overeating or choosing unhealthy foods. If you can identify the underlying emotions, such as boredom, stress, fear, sadness, happiness, inadequacy, shame, celebration, or reward, you can work on finding healthy coping skills that make you feel better. For example, eating handful after handful of chips while bored could be replaced by listening to music, taking a walk or reading a good book. Once you have identified the emotion, you can begin to find a healthy way to cope with it.



Examples of healthy emotion-focused coping skills are numerous and include: going for a walk, writing in a journal, drawing, listening to music, taking a bath, playing with a pet, cleaning the house, reading a book, meditating, playing with your children, working on a hobby, spending time in nature, praying, using deep breathing exercises, making a list of all the things you are grateful for, gardening, focusing on the good things in your life, progressive muscle relaxation, drinking tea, thinking about the

situation differently, practicing yoga, laughing, smiling, thinking of people who bring you joy, doing something nice for yourself, or using a meditation or relaxation app.

Avoid Unhealthy Coping

Not all strategies that help you reduce distress are healthy. Some means of coping may temporarily help you to feel better, but have a negative impact on your overall health. Be sure to avoid numbing with drugs or alcohol; stuffing your feelings with food; overly restrict eating as a way to feel in control; sleeping too much; overspending; or ignoring a situation that needs to be changed.

Find What Works

There is always room for growth and improvement to continually sharpen your skills. The strategies that work for someone else might not work for you. You need your own toolkit of skills and strategies to use in different situations. When you learn and practice skills that minimize stress and regularly take care of your emotional needs, you find yourself less vulnerable to temptations and more empowered to make healthy choices.

Apple, Spring Greens, Chicken Salad

1/4 cup olive oil
1 teaspoon grated lemon rind
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, divided
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, divided
12 ounces skinless, boneless chicken breasts
Cooking spray
6 cups mixed baby spring greens
2 medium carrots, peeled and thinly sliced diagonally
2 celery stalks, thinly sliced
1 apple, skinned and cut into 1/4-in.-thick slices
1/4 cup sliced almonds, toasted

Stir together oil, rind, juice, thyme, mustard, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Place 2 tablespoons juice mixture in a large re-closable plastic bag; reserve remaining juice mixture. Add chicken to bag and marinate for 10 minutes or longer—turning the bag occasionally to distribute juice mixture.

Coat a large skillet with cooking spray and heat on medium-high. Remove chicken from plastic bag and pat dry. Sprinkle chicken with remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt. Add chicken to pan; cook 5 minutes on each side or until done. Remove chicken from heat and let stand for 5 minutes before cutting into thin slices.

Combine spring mix, carrots, celery, and apple in large bowl and add remaining juice mixture, tossing to coat. Divide salad mixture evenly among 4 plate and top with chicken. Sprinkle with almonds and remaining 1/4 teaspoon pepper. Makes 4 servings.

Nutrition information per serving: 317 calories, 24 grams protein, 20 grams fat, 12 grams carbohydrate, 318 mg sodium.

Fresh Tossed Asparagus and Mozzarella Salad

8 ounces asparagus
1 head butter lettuce
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
½ tsp lemon zest
Juice of 1 lemon
1 small clove garlic, peeled and minced
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon black pepper
1/4 teaspoon dry mustard

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1/4 cup pistachios
6 ounces mozzarella balls

Trim the asparagus and cut on the diagonal into thin slices and set aside. Tear lettuce leaves into bite-size pieces, rinse, pat dry and set aside. In a large salad bowl, Whisk together lemon zest, 1 tablespoon of the lemon juice, garlic, olive oil, salt, pepper and mustard. Add the asparagus and lettuce and gently toss to coat thoroughly.

Divide the salad evenly among 6 salad plates. Sprinkle each serving with pistachios and mozzarella balls. Makes 6 servings.

Nutrition information per serving: 162 calories, 8 grams protein, 13 grams fat, 4 grams carbohydrate, 373 mg sodium.