

CREATIVE HEALING



Hi! My name is Katie K. May and I'm a licensed teen therapist. After years of working in an adolescent psychiatric partial program and working with hundreds of teens with anxiety, depression and self-harm behaviors, I started to notice a trend...

Teens were telling me that they knew how to cope with difficult feelings, but their self-destructive actions and repeated hospitalizations were showing me otherwise. It was the same conversation over and over again...

Me: "What are your coping skills?"

Teen: "Music, drawing, journaling..."

They were listing coping skills and saying all the right words, but something was missing. And regardless of how well they knew the "right answers" to the question, they still weren't using these skills to effectively cope with difficult feelings.

I wasn't about to give up on these teens and I knew there had to be a better way.

It was around this time that I began to transition out of my psychiatric hospital position and begin to offer Teen Therapy Groups and Teen DBT Skills Group to the community through my business Creative Healing, a place for self-expression, support and connection for teens. Here I developed my tried and true anytime, anywhere coping skills. The same ones I'll share with you on the next page!

Anytime Anywhere Coping Skills

First, the basics...

Coping skills must be planned and intentional. Practice them everyday. Use them even when you don't need them. The idea is to OVER practice them so that when you need them in a moment of crisis, they are already routine for you. Think about it, I wouldn't tell you how to go run a marathon, then expect you to be able to do it a few days later. You would learn the technique and practice it over and over again so that when race day arrived, your body was ready for action. (Side note: One of the things I LOVE about my Teen Therapy Groups and my Teen DBT Skills Groups is that we actually practice coping skills IN group! I'm not just giving teens lists and asking them to check off what they are going to do. We are actually bringing up difficult feelings IN session then working through how to cope right there. It's the ultimate dress rehearsal for real life situations!)

Learn to recognize your warning signs. I've heard many teens utter the phrase "Coping skills don't work" because they don't try to use them until they are in a state of extreme panic or hopelessness. The idea is to begin to recognize those first signs of distress and use your coping skills at that point BEFORE emotions become extreme. Practice tuning in to yourself by asking the following questions:

- What's going through my head right now?
- What emotions do I notice?
- What am I feeling in my body?
- What urges do I have?

Once you have a clear idea of the answers to these questions on a regular basis (you'll be practicing mindfulness when you do this everyday) then you'll have the skills to notice when these thoughts, feelings and body sensations begin to shift. What's the first small sign that you are beginning to feel more anxious or depressed? Maybe you get really tense. Maybe you notice a drop in your stomach and begin to have thoughts about others not loving you. These signs are personal to you, so as you recognize them, write them down. These are your warning signs as as soon as you notice the FIRST one, use your coping skills to head off a crisis.

Manage your expectations. Coping skills are meant to help you COPE. They will not make your feelings go away completely. And if that's what you want, well, then we

really need to talk about your beliefs about emotions too. Everyone feels a full range of feelings. When you try and ignore or stuff sadness or anxiety without dealing with it, it turns into numbness. And when you feel numb, it may lead to you engaging in self-destructive behaviors in an attempt to feel again. The only way to is through. What does this mean? The only way to get to the feelings you want to have is by going through the ones that are uncomfortable for you. Coping skills are meant to distract you or soothe you when your emotions are just too intense to manage in a given moment, but you ALWAYS need to come back to them when you're in a safe place, have support and feel ready to process so that they're not just popping up again and again when you don't want them to.

Cope in a difficult situation with these three steps...

1. **Change your environment.** If you're in class, ask to use the bathroom. If you're in your bedroom, head to the living room. If you're at a friend's house, go for a walk. A change of environment can help distract you or quickly change up your emotions.
2. **Break the isolation.** Don't let your thoughts and urges stay swirling in your head. Tell someone about them. Or, if you're not ready to talk about it, go find someone to talk to you about something else. Text a friend, call a parent, go to your guidance counselor. Make a connection with someone. Failing to take this step is planning to stay stuck in your negative thought loop.
3. **Change the channel in your mind.** Play a game, go window shopping, doodle in class, take a walk, watch a TV show. Whatever you do, get your mind on something else until you feel the overwhelming emotion begin to decrease or become more manageable.

As with any coping skill, remember that this is a temporary plan. The idea is to cope in the moment when difficult situations arise so as not to make the situation worse. But then come back to the thoughts and feelings with the support of a parent or therapist in order to find the root of what's causing the feelings.

Need support using your coping skills? Teen Therapy Group and Teen DBT Skills Group are an amazing support system of teens who are all working towards managing difficult feelings and coping effectively. Email me at Katie@creativehealingphilly.com to schedule a complimentary call and explore whether this is the right treatment for you!

Wait, there's more!

Because you can't always have your phone, headphones, a zen coloring book and a journal at your side, it's important to learn some coping skills that don't require equipment. Check out the list below for some ways to cope with a difficult situation when you don't have any supplies.

Square Breathing

Breathe in while counting to four in your head. Hold your breath for a count of four. Exhale for a count of four. Repeat this four times. Breathing slows down your body and allows you to have some space between your thoughts and your reactions (so you don't make a self-destructive decision.) The counting helps distract your mind and it also grounds you in the moment. Try to practice square breathing every night before you go to sleep. Make it as routine as brushing your teeth so that you always have this skill practiced and ready when you need it.

Count Objects in the Room

Count how many chairs are in the room. See if you can count how many blue objects you see. Notice how many colors are in a painting on the wall. When you can attach the idea of counting to a physical object or a certain goal, it becomes much more effective. Have a plan before you go into a situation that makes you nervous. Cope ahead by having an idea of your surroundings before you get there and deciding what you will count when you enter the room.

Picture a Safe or Happy Place

Use your five senses to include as much detail as possible in imagining this place in your mind. Where is your safe place? Maybe it's your bedroom or the beach. Imagine the sights, sounds, physical sensations and smells of actually being there. Get a crystal clear picture in your mind. Then, supercharge the image by adding in the FEELINGS you feel when you're in this place. Really embody the relaxation and bliss you'll feel when you're in this place. Practice bringing this visualization into your mind for one minute every single day and you'll begin to notice results in how quickly you can change the channel in your mind to this image when you need it.

I would  to connect with you

I would love to connect with you and help you put these skills into action. Even with the best information at hand, it still takes support and practice to begin to cope with success.

Email me at Katie@creativehealingphilly.com to schedule a complimentary call to explore how Teen Therapy Group or Teen DBT Skills Group can support you in effectively coping with your difficult emotions.

With love,

Katie K. May, MS, NCC, LPC

Katie K. May, MS, NCC, LPC, DBTC
Licensed Teen Counselor, DBT Certified
www.creativehealingphilly.com