Annexure 12: Helping the Client
Explore Options and Self-help Strategies for Successful Coping

Source: Kustner, 2011

The goal of counselling is to empower the client, and through the problem-treatment cycle the client moves from exploring problems to finding solutions. In exploring solutions, the client needs to discover their own inner resources and coping skills, as well as look at external sources of support such as:

- Self-help treatments and coping strategies;
- Professional counselling, psychiatric and general health practitioners;
- Other service providers; and
- Drawing support from family, friends and community.

Self-help Strategies and Successful Coping Responses

1. **Be Proactive.** Instead of passively waiting for things to get better, this gives us an increased feeling of competence and self-esteem. Make a decision to do something about the situation you are in.

2. **Practice Relaxation Techniques.** Relaxation doesn’t just happen – it’s a skill you need to practice. Taking slow deep breaths helps you remain in control and get through the stress more efficiently.

3. **Positive Self-talk.** So often, if we really listen, we can hear the negative things we are telling ourselves: ‘She doesn’t like me’, ‘I’m going to mess this up’, ‘He’s funnier than I am’. By using positive self-talk, you can start to hear words of encouragement and support. You will be surprised at how different that feels. Try this with deep breathing and see how much better you feel.
4. Physical Activity. It does not have to be much. Even just a brisk walk for 15 to 20 minutes can help lessen stress reaction and promote a general sense of well-being. Physical activity causes endorphins to be released, which are the body’s feel-good hormones. Regular exercise can also improve your body’s ability to handle stress in general.

5. Writing. Can be an effective means of working through stress as well as gaining a better understanding of what is bothering you. Keeping stressful thoughts to oneself can cause them to grow, as well as creating a new stress from holding on to these upsetting feelings. Write until you feel done.

6. Realistic Appraisals. Coping effectively with life’s problems and failures requires realistic expectations. Psychologists call these expectations and judgments appraisals. Life events aren’t a problem unless we appraise them as such. If our appraisals are realistic, we’re better able to react to day-to-day life events with a sense of proportion. It is possible to put an alternative interpretation in the place of an irrational judgment. Suppose someone treats you rudely. You may be tempted to think that that person is horrible, or ‘Everyone dislikes me’. An alternative interpretation could be: ‘I wonder what’s happening with that person for them to behave so rudely?’ We have the choice how to frame our perceptions.

7. Art. Creative endeavours are a known means of self-expression. Grab a piece of paper and some markers, paints, or crayons. Fill the page with colour. It does not matter what it looks like. Just do what seems to come next. Grab some magazines, scissors, and glue – make a collage. Make a mobile. Sculpt a shape out of mud. Arrange leaves and branches in a jar of water. The key is not to focus on the end product, but the process.

8. Meditation. Meditation need not be a complex, structured process that you learn from years of practice. You do not even need to buy a book. Think of a place that you love. Focus on the details. Focus on how it feels to be there, what sounds you hear, what smells arise. Focus all of your attention on the image. You may even fall asleep. Try doing this while taking slow deep breaths and listening to your favourite relaxing music.

9. Music. Listening to music is a powerful tool in coping. Music has the power to take the listener along any number of emotional paths. Pick your music wisely. Choose music that allows you to feel in a safe way, but does not create additional stress. Listening to cheery love songs, for example, may not facilitate coping if you are feeling sad and alone. Sometimes your music should be in the background; sometimes it should fill the room. Know what works for you, and allow yourself to do it.

10. Friends. Turning to friends during times of stress can be an invaluable coping tool. Friends can validate who you are and how you feel. They can provide a caring ear, ready and willing to listen and support you. Be aware of who your friends are. Surround yourself with caring supportive people who are quick to jump to your defence and want to protect you from getting hurt – not people who tend to put you on the spot or make you feel defensive.

11. Good Nutrition. Eating a healthy and well-balanced diet is not only good for the body but also for the mind. There is ample research to suggest that certain foods improve mood, concentration and mental agility. In addition, the act of preparing nutritious meals for friends and family assists with isolation and loneliness.

12. Smile. Even if it’s forced. The physical action of smiling sends positive messages to your brain.