

Do you have a coping strategy?



BY NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG, *Correspondent*

Have you ever felt overwhelmed? The examples are endless of those feeling confused or unable to accomplish their tasks. A few examples follow:

- Karen, an artist who shows her work at a local farmers market, said, “I wish I could clone myself so I could be at two places at once. Everything I am doing is great . . . it is just too much. . . I’ve been a salmon swimming upstream lately.”
- A couple agonized over their decision to move into a retirement community. Even more than letting go of some of the material things to which they were attached, the idea of moving into “their last place” scared them. Even though the decision was theirs, they felt trapped.
- A woman, part of a group in Venice, Fla. who were mostly transplants active in community and civic affairs, shared that life had dealt her an unexpected blow. She and her husband, a retired physician, were excited about moving to a new community. Soon after they arrived, he had a stroke, and their lives were upended.
- A woman appointed to a university presidency couldn’t understand why she was so upset. After all, she had her dream job. She had not realized that this led to a major disruption in her life . . . moving to a new community, leaving close friends and changing from a faculty role to a leadership role. Even happy transitions can be stressful.

What can we do when we face positive and negative challenges that overwhelm us?

First, remember that you already have a repertoire of coping strategies that have helped you in the past.

Second, realize that when the going gets tough, you may well need to expand your strategies. Sociologists Leonard Pearlin and Carmi Schooler interviewed 2,300 people between the ages of 18 and 65 living in the Chicago area to identify the major coping strategies people used as they faced life’s strains and joys. There are literally hundreds of strategies, which they categorized into the following groups: those you employ to try to change the situation, those that change its meaning, and those that help you relax.

Third, use those categories as your guide. For example, you can ask three questions when facing a challenge: Can I change the situation? Can I change the meaning of the situation? Can I relax?

Karen could change her situation by eliminating some of her activities or putting them on hold. In fact, she is thinking of approaching a local university to see if she could have a student intern to help her with her art business. The retired couple could not change the fact of his stroke so they had to reframe. Among people I know who have been challenged with medical problems, some have looked to role models like Stephen Hawking and Christopher Reeves. They grieve for what they have lost but rejoice in what is left. The couple moving into a retirement community can reframe the move as an opportunity to remain active and engaged with like-minded people. And everyone can benefit from using strategies like meditation, swimming, yoga and walking to reduce stress.

I have personally tested this three-question approach. Many years ago when I was in my 50s, I accepted a speaking engagement in Denver. I arrived at the hotel only to be told that I

was not registered, and the organization I represented was not listed. I called the organization and found out that I had arrived a month early. You can only imagine the feelings I had. I called my husband who put things in perspective when he said, “Nancy, you cannot fall apart in Denver. Your new book ‘Overwhelmed’ is about to be published and if you fall apart, it will be bad for book sales.” That mobilized me.

I knew I had to calm down, so I went across the street to a wonderful restaurant. As I was eating a lovely meal, I said, “Is there anything in my book that could help?” I remembered the three categories of coping strategies. I asked myself, “Can I change this situation?” The answer to that was clear. There was no way I could turn October into November. The second category held more promise. I could change the way I saw it. I began telling myself I was not a dowdy professor. I could visit Denver for lunch, maybe San Francisco for dinner and Paris for a long weekend. I could use this error as a way to become a world traveler. And, finally, I could use the third category of relaxing by going up and down the famous Denver walking/shopping street where I could walk aerobically in and out of stores. By the end of the lunch, I was a happy camper.

The take away: There is no single, magic-bullet coping strategy. You need to assess whether you want to and can change what is challenging you; if you can’t change it, reframe it; and no matter what, use relaxation strategies. In other words, the strategy you use depends on your particular situation. Creative coping means using strategies flexibly.



Photo by Rod Millington

Sarasota resident and former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, Nancy K. Schlossberg blogs and writes self-help books, including “Overwhelmed: Coping With Life’s Ups and Downs.” You can contact her through www.transitionthroughlife.com or at nancyks4@gmail.com.



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