

Dealing with Overwhelming Emotions

Awakening your ability to handle emotions in a way to help calm your brain down and soothe your mind, body, and spirit is important to regaining feelings of safety and security. Use your own strengths, interests and support systems to relieve overwhelming emotions and body sensations. Pay attention to your emotional and physical response to the activities, and choose which ones are most helpful.

Here is a list of positive coping strategies to get you thinking about what may be helpful for you:

Physical activity: helping your body to express the emotion and relieve tension

- Walk, run, boxing, dance, ride a bike, hit a pillow or something soft, yoga, aerobics

Cognitive strategies: calming your body and mind down by reassuring yourself about safety and positive self-image

- Affirmations, positive self-talk, meditation, prayer, guided imagery, counting to 10
- Mindfulness—be present in the moment
- Reframe—change negative, blaming thoughts into positive thoughts
- Containment—picture emotions being placed in a box until you are able to process them

Art or creative energy: release emotions in an expressive way

- Listen to music, make music, sing, record your emotions in a journal or voice recorder, read or write poetry, draw, color, knitting/crocheting, cooking/baking, gardening, painting, sculpting

Use your 5 senses to experience positive sensations in your body

- Hot bath/shower, candles, massage, calming music and sounds, body lotions, pet animals/soft objects, worry stones, aromatherapy, cooking

Do something you're good at: be creative with this one!

Take control of the situation: combat feelings of helplessness by being active in your coping

- Take a break, walk away, use your sense of humor, educate yourself about trauma, emotions, coping, take some time for yourself, organize, clean, get something little done

Connect with others: reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness

- Talk to a trusted friend or family member, call or text someone, play a game, take care of a pet, help others, talk to a therapist or counselor, reach out for a hug/ positive touch, go to the mall or somewhere with a lot of people, read about others' similar experiences

Use spiritual resources: Engage in activities that are consistent with your spiritual values and beliefs

- Pray/meditate, explore nature, read spiritual passages, attend service

Relax: be gentle with yourself and provide time for your body to calm down

- Take a nap, go for a drive, watch a movie/tv, computer, take a vacation, read, do a puzzle, mindful breathing

Relieve tension: work through physical sensations of tension and anxiety

- Yell (not at anyone), cry, exercise, massage

MSU Sexual Assault Program has **free self-care items** available for survivors—feel free to check out our selection. Items were donated from the 2011 Women’s Leadership Conference.

One important aspect of soothing our bodies and brains is **becoming aware of emotions and body sensations**. It’s important not to judge our how our bodies feel, but to accept them as they are. Emotions tell us something, and it’s important to figure out what the emotions are saying. Once we do this, we are better equipped to know how to handle this emotion.

Dealing with dissociation, flashbacks, and triggers:

Flashbacks, dissociation, and being triggered by situations are normal after trauma, but can feel uncomfortable and scary, and they can limit functioning. Often called GROUNDING, using the 5 senses can bring you back to the present moment to assure your body that you are safe. Use the suggestions from up above related to the 5 senses, or try the following activities:

- Mental recitation of where you are, who you are, date/time
- Counting on fingers
- Quick appraisal of situation or environment to assess safety
- Positive self-talk of ability to handle situation
- Mindful or deep breathing to center yourself in your body
- Bilateral stimulation (activating both sides of your body/brain) by walking or giving yourself a hug and tapping on your arms (butterfly hug)

Some coping strategies that we tend to use may make the problem worse. These include, but are not limited to, numbing through alcohol, drugs, food, or sleep, provoking conflict with others, engaging in negative thinking such as self-blame, self-injury, and putting ourselves or someone else at risk for bodily or psychological injury. While these coping strategies may feel hard to break, it’s possible to find a replacement strategy to fill a certain need. *It may help to identify the feeling behind the behavior you want to stop, as well as the need that you are trying to meet. Then, brainstorm other possible ways to cope with this feeling or meet this need.*

Many people also find it helpful to learn more about coping, trauma, and how others survive trauma. Here is a list of resources that may be helpful to you:

- *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Beginning to Heal: A First Book for Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis
- *Invisible Heroes: Survivors of Trauma and How They Heal* by Belleruth Naparstek
- *Miss America By Day: Lessons Learned from Ultimate Betrayal and Unconditional Love* by Marilyn Van Derbur
- *Voices of Courage* Edited by Michael Domitrz
- *The Rape Recovery Handbook* by Aphrodite Matsakis

Keep in mind that some of the books may include stories of others’ experiences that may be difficult to read. If you find that you become overwhelmed while reading a book, it’s okay to take a break and use a helpful calming strategy, and it’s important to share your experiences with someone else, like a trusted friend or therapist.

MSU Sexual Assault Program also has a **Resource Library** with many more books, DVDs and CDs for you to borrow at no charge.