

---

## Dealing with Uncontrollable circumstances

**Ineffective** ways of Dealing with Uncontrollable circumstances

### Over-control

Rigid 'over-controlled' individuals suffer from difficulty in regulating and directing their self-control. In contrast, individuals with high levels of self-control can exert this when it is required and suspend self-control when not required.

Over-control is also often reflected by obsessive thinking. In attempts to control the uncontrollable, the individual finds him/herself trying to solve problems in his/her head. Plagued by thoughts and images of disastrous outcomes that in reality may never come to be, the individual becomes trapped in an endless process of "figuring it out." Basically, being able to let go of control when it is *unhelpful or ineffective* is an essential skill for well-being.

### Passive Coping

Passive coping refers to not taking any action at all. Whereas people who engage in over-control typically experience a strong sense of responsibility to modify or control situations, people who engage in passive coping deny responsibility and relinquish to others the control of the stressful situation and of their reaction to that situation.

So, responsibility is given to an outside source and feelings of helplessness typically emerge. Passive coping is associated with poor outcomes & depression. Examples of passive coping strategies include complaining to others either to cope with difficult feelings, get sympathy or elicit their help, withdrawing from challenging activities, or relying on medication to cope with the situation.

**Effective** ways of Dealing with Uncontrollable circumstances

### Surrender

The uncontrollability of events is perhaps most directly experienced in life's most extreme moments: the death of a loved one, violent assault, sexual abuse, or being stricken with a life-threatening disease. In situations like these, the options for personal control are severely limited.

Other, less extreme examples of when something cannot be controlled include: the inability to deliberately fall asleep, the inability determine what other people think and how they react, and the inability to stop thoughts from occurring. In all these examples, attempts to exert control may not only be unproductive but may even be counterproductive. The person who tries to control their sleep may find themselves awake for many hours. Likewise, the person trying to "get out of his/her head" and stop thoughts may find themselves producing more thoughts and spending even more time "in their head." In other words, the solution here is not to exert more control, but less. The solution here is to surrender to the uncontrollable and to accept that there is simply nothing one can do to change the situation.

It is important to note that *surrendering differs from being overtaken by emotions or being controlled by others*. Being overtaken occurs without choice; surrendering is an active, intentional process: people agree to surrender. Moreover, surrendering also differs from giving up and losing hope. Surrender means letting go of unproductive efforts to control the uncontrollable while at the same time focusing on dealing what we can personally influence.

### **Active coping**

When there is nothing that one can do to change a given situation, this does not mean that one cannot deal with the situation in an active way. Active coping refers to strategies that are directed at problem solving, and entails taking direct action to deal with a stressor to reduce its effects. These strategies aim to either to change the nature of the stressful situation or to modify how one thinks and feels about it.

Basically, people who engage in active coping rely upon their own resources to deal with a situation. Examples include solving problems, investing more effort, seeking information, or reframing the meaning of the problem. Active coping is an adaptive way of dealing with events and an important component of resilience in the face of stress, health problems, and other adversity.

When confronted with uncontrollable circumstances, it is important to engage in active coping, focusing on the aspects of the situation that are within the bounds of personal control. In most low/no-control situations, this means dealing with emotions and feelings that are present (emotion-focused coping), rather than trying to control aspects of the environment (problem-focused coping). Indeed, research has shown that using emotion-focused, compared with problem-focused copying style is perceived as more helpful in low-control situations.

In a social setting, active coping can also involve communicating about one's feelings or emotions. Note that the active coping person takes full responsibility for the emotions that are experienced as the result of a certain uncontrollable situation but **does not** attempt to control or manipulate the situation by expressing their personal feelings. Instead, they inform the other person about the consequences of his/her actions with the intention to improve the situation for all parties involved.

*Effective coping with uncontrollable circumstances requires the individual to acknowledge that he/she has little or no influence over the external circumstance and that he/she has a choice in how to deal with the feelings that emerge because of the uncontrollable situation.*