Safe coping skills

We all have problems. The way we solve them is what makes us different.
—Unknown

Coping means how you respond to problems – how you try to solve them.
Picture yourself going through a painful divorce. Poor coping would be drinking a lot, isolating, and gaining weight on junk food. These short-term fixes worsen problems. Good coping might be joining a support group and taking care of yourself by getting sleep and exercise. These help in the long term.

In short, you can't always control what happens, but you can choose how you respond. Strive for solutions that build strength and healing. As long as it's safe – not hurting yourself or anyone else – it's good coping.

Trauma and addiction make it difficult to cope well. But good coping can be learned. This chapter offers a list of more than 80 safe coping skills relevant to trauma and addiction. The list was published in the book Seeking Safety (www.seekingsafety.org) and has been used all over the world. Add your own safe coping skills to the list – there are as many ways of coping safely as there are people. Find what works for you and let go of the rest. Many people find it helpful to carry around a copy of the list as a reminder.

* Explore . . . The Safe Coping Skills List

Put a star next to new coping skills you want to try; put a checkmark next to those you're already good at. Experiment with all sorts of skills. Remember, too, that context matters: a skill that is healthy in one setting may not be in another. If you don't understand some of the skills, ask a counselor or trusted person to help you.
Safe Coping Skills

1. **Ask for help:** Reach out to someone safe.
2. **Inspire yourself:** Carry something positive (e.g., poem) or negative (e.g., photo of friend who overdosed).
3. **Leave a bad scene:** When things go wrong, get out.
4. **Persist:** Never, never, never, never, never, never, never, never give up.
5. **Honesty:** Secrets and lying are at the core of trauma and addiction; honesty heals them.
6. **Cry:** Let yourself cry; it will not last forever.
7. **Choose self-respect:** Choose whatever will make you like yourself tomorrow.
8. **Take good care of your body:** Healthy eating, exercise, safe sex.
9. **List your options:** In any situation, you have choices.
10. **Create meaning:** Remind yourself what you are living for: your children? love? truth? justice? God?
11. **Do the best you can with what you have:** Make the most of available opportunities.
12. **Set a boundary:** Say "no" to protect yourself.
13. **Compassion:** Listen to yourself with respect and care.
14. **When in doubt, do what's hardest:** The most difficult path is invariably the right one.
15. **Talk yourself through it:** Self-talk helps in difficult times.
16. **Imagine:** Create a mental picture that helps you to feel different (e.g., remember a safe place).
17. **Notice the choice point:** In slow motion, notice the exact moment when you chose unsafe behavior.
18. **Pace yourself:** If overwhelmed, go slower; if stagnant, go faster.
19. **Stay safe:** Do whatever you need to do to put your safety above all.
20. **Seek understanding, not blame:** Listen to your behavior; blaming prevents growth.
21. **If one way doesn't work, try another:** As if in a maze, turn a corner and try a new path.
22. **Link trauma and addiction:** Recognize addiction as an attempt to soothe emotional pain.
23. **Alone is better than a bad relationship:** If only treaters are safe for now, that's okay.
24. **Create a new story:** You are the author of your life: be the hero who overcomes adversity.
25. **Avoid avoidable suffering:** Prevent bad situations in advance.
26. **Ask others:** Ask others if your belief is accurate.
27. **Get organized:** You'll feel more in control with "to-do" lists and a clean house.
28. **Watch for danger signs:** Face a problem before it becomes huge; notice red flags.
29. **Healing above all:** Focus on what matters.
30. **Try something, anything:** A good plan today is better than a perfect one tomorrow.
31. **Discovery:** Find out whether your assumption is true rather than staying "in your head."
32. **Attend treatment:** AA, self-help, counseling, medications, groups – anything that keeps you going.
33. **Create a buffer:** Put something between you and danger (e.g., time, distance).
34. **Say what you really think:** You'll feel closer to others (but only do this with safe

This list is adapted from *Seeking Safety* by Lisa M. Najavits (2002) with permission of the author. All rights reserved.
35. Listen to your needs: No more neglect – really hear what you need.
36. Move toward your opposite: For example, if you are too dependent, try being more independent.
37. Replay the scene: Review a negative event; What can you do differently next time?
38. Notice the cost: What is the price of addiction in your life?
39. Structure your day: A productive schedule keeps you on track and connected to the world.
40. Set an action plan: Be specific, set a deadline, and let others know about it.
41. Protect yourself: Put up a shield against destructive people, bad environments, and addiction.
42. Soothing talk: Talk to yourself very gently (as if to a friend or small child).
43. Think of the consequences: Really see the impact for tomorrow, next week, next year.
44. Trust the process: Just keep moving forward; the only way out is through.
45. Work the material: The more you practice and participate, the quicker the healing.
46. Integrate the split self: Accept all sides of yourself; they are there for a reason.
47. Expect growth to feel uncomfortable: If it feels awkward or difficult, you’re doing it right.
48. Replace destructive activities: Eat candy instead of getting high.
49. Pretend you like yourself: See how different the day feels.
50. Focus on now: Do what you can to make today better; don’t get overwhelmed by the past or future.
51. Praise yourself: Notice what you did right; this is the most powerful method of growth.
52. Observe repeating patterns: Try to notice and understand your reenactments.
53. Self-nurture: Do something that you enjoy (e.g., take a walk, see a movie).
54. Practice delay: If you can’t totally prevent a self-destructive act, at least delay it as long as possible.
55. Let go of destructive relationships: If it can’t be fixed, detach.
56. Take responsibility: Take an active, not a passive approach.
57. Set a deadline: Make it happen by setting a date.
58. Make a commitment: Promise yourself to do what’s right to help your recovery.
59. Rethink: Think in a way that helps you feel better.
60. Detach from emotional pain (grounding): Distract, walk away, change the channel.
61. Learn from experience: Seek wisdom that can help you next time.
62. Solve the problem: Don’t take it personally when things go wrong – try just to seek a solution.
63. Use kinder language: Make your language less harsh.
64. Examine the evidence: Evaluate both sides of the issue.
65. Plan it out: Take the time to think ahead – it’s the opposite of impulsivity.
66. Identify the belief: Examples: shoulds, deprivation reasoning.
67. Reward yourself: Find a healthy way to celebrate anything you do right.
68. Create a new script: Rehearse new ways of thinking.
69. Find rules to live by: Remember a phrase that works for you (e.g., “Stay real”).
70. Setbacks are not failures: A setback is just a setback, nothing more.
71. Tolerate the feeling: “No feeling is final” – just get through it safely.
72. Actions first, and feelings will follow: Don’t wait until you feel motivated; just start now.
73. Create positive addictions: Examples: sports, hobbies, AA.
74. When in doubt, don’t: If you suspect
danger, stay away. 75. **Fight the trigger:** Take an active approach to protect yourself. 76. **Notice the source:** Before you accept criticism or advice, notice who’s telling it to you. 77. **Make a decision:** If you’re stuck, try choosing the best solution you can right now; don’t wait. 78. **Do the right thing:** Do what you know will help you even if you don’t feel like it. 79. **Go to a meeting:** Feet first; just get there and let the rest happen. 80. **Protect your body from HIV:** This is truly an important issue. 81. **Prioritize healing:** Make healing your most urgent and important goal, above all else. 82. **Reach for community resources:** Lean on them! They can be a source of great support. 83. **Get others to support your recovery:** Tell people what you need. 84. **Notice what you can control:** List the aspects of your life you do control (e.g., job, friends...).

**Keep It Visible**

- In your wallet (good coping is worth more than money).
- On your mirror (reflect who you’re becoming).
- On your refrigerator (serve up healthy coping).
- Or anywhere else that keeps it visible – your phone, car, or elsewhere.

✧ What safe coping skills can you use today?

✧ Where can you keep this list so you’ll remember to keep using it?

✧ Do you notice any positive feelings as you go through the list?

✧ Are there other safe coping skills you use that aren’t on this list?

---

**RECOVERY VOICES**

**Brianna – “I have a choice here.”**

“Here’s what the coping skills are for me: I get triggered, I take a breath, and I say, ‘I have a choice here.’ I survived terrible trauma as a kid and reacted to it by buying stuff to fill the emptiness inside. I was addicted to external things. I always had a beautiful sports car, clothes, all of that stuff. I had huge amounts of things. But I finally really got what people say – nothing on the outside is gonna fill you...”