

# Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms Handout

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When faced with stress, trauma, or difficult emotions, people sometimes develop coping strategies that may provide temporary relief but can be harmful in the long run. While these responses are understandable attempts to manage pain or distress, recognizing them is the first step toward developing healthier coping skills.



## **Social withdrawal**

Social withdrawal manifests as a pattern of pulling away from friends and family, often accompanied by declining social invitations and spending excessive time alone. People experiencing this may find themselves actively avoiding communication with others, even those closest to them. This behavior can have serious consequences, leading to increased isolation and the weakening of valuable support systems.

## **Substance use**

Substance use as a coping mechanism involves turning to alcohol or drugs as a way to numb emotional pain or manage overwhelming feelings. Individuals might find themselves increasingly relying on these substances to handle stress or anxiety, often requiring more over time to achieve the same numbing effect. This pattern can evolve into addiction, creating serious health problems and diminishing one's ability to regulate emotions naturally.

## **Risk-taking behavior**

Risk-taking behavior emerges when individuals engage in dangerous activities or make impulsive decisions without considering the consequences. People might seek out adrenaline rushes as a way to escape from difficult emotions or uncomfortable thoughts. This behavior can result in serious physical harm, legal complications, or significant damage to important relationships, which creates a cycle of additional problems that need to be managed.

## **Anger-fueled conflict**

This coping mechanism involves becoming quick to anger in situations that might not typically warrant such a response. People might find themselves frequently starting arguments or engaging in confrontations as a way to avoid dealing with underlying emotions. This pattern of behavior can severely damage personal relationships and create difficulties in professional settings.

## **Overworking**

Overworking involves an excessive focus on work tasks and taking on additional hours unnecessarily. People might use their work as an escape, immersing themselves in professional responsibilities to avoid dealing with personal issues or difficult emotions. This pattern can lead to severe burnout, neglected personal relationships, and various physical and mental health issues that arise from chronic stress and lack of life balance.

## **Rumination**

Rumination involves getting caught in a cycle of repeatedly dwelling on negative thoughts and overthinking past events. People experiencing this might find themselves unable to let go of problems, continuously replaying situations in their minds without reaching any resolution. This pattern can prevent effective problem-solving, as energy is spent on repetitive thoughts rather than constructive action.

## **Avoidance**

Avoidance manifests as a persistent pattern of refusing to face difficult situations or emotions. This might include chronic procrastination on important tasks or denying that problems exist altogether. While this may provide temporary relief, avoided problems typically worsen over time, leading to increased stress and more complicated situations that become increasingly difficult to address.

## **Maladaptive perfectionism**

Maladaptive perfectionism involves setting and maintaining unrealistically high standards while engaging in excessive self-criticism. People experiencing this might develop an intense fear of making mistakes, leading to procrastination or obsessive behavior. This pattern can result in chronic anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and persistent feelings of inadequacy, even when performing at a high level. The constant pressure to be perfect can lead to burnout and significantly impact self-esteem.

These coping mechanisms often develop as attempts to protect ourselves, but they can create additional problems over time. If you recognize these patterns in yourself, know that it's possible to develop healthier coping strategies with proper support and guidance. Consider reaching out to a mental health professional who can help you build more effective ways to manage stress and difficult emotions.

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## References

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