Why coping skills should support rather than suppress emotions

The purpose of coping skills in emotional health

Coping skills are often taught as tools to "manage" difficult feelings, a way to calm down, distract, or push through emotional discomfort. But there is a meaningful difference between skills that temporarily suppress an emotion and skills that help a person process what they are feeling. For therapists and helping professionals, understanding this distinction is essential. The goal is not to eliminate emotions but to build a relationship with them that allows for growth, self-awareness, and resilience.

Many traditional approaches to coping focus on reducing arousal. Breathing exercises, grounding techniques, and distraction strategies can be helpful in moments of crisis, especially when someone is overwhelmed. But when these same strategies are used habitually to avoid feeling, they can become a form of emotional avoidance. The person learns to shut down rather than to listen. Over time, this pattern can weaken emotional regulation and increase distress tolerance problems, because the underlying feelings are never fully acknowledged or understood.

What it means to support emotions

Supporting an emotion means staying present with it, even when it is uncomfortable. It involves noticing the physical sensations, the thoughts that accompany the feeling, and the impulse to act. Instead of trying to make the feeling go away, the person learns to observe it with curiosity. This is where mindfulness and interoception, the ability to sense internal bodily states, become valuable. They allow someone to track how an emotion shows up in the body without immediately reacting to it.

For example, a client who feels a surge of anxiety might be taught to notice the tightness in their chest, the shallow breathing, and the urge to escape. A suppression-based coping skill might tell them to breathe deeply until the feeling passes. A support-based approach might guide them to breathe while staying with the sensation, describing it in neutral terms, and allowing it to shift naturally. The feeling may still change, but it does so because it was processed, not because it was pushed away.

This difference matters because emotions carry information. Anger can signal a boundary violation. Sadness can signal a loss that needs grieving. Fear can signal a real or perceived threat. When coping skills are used to bypass these messages, the person loses access to

valuable data about their own needs and environment. Over time, this can lead to confusion, chronic stress, and a sense of disconnection from oneself.

How suppression-based coping can backfire

Suppression is not always harmful in the short term. In a high-stakes moment, during a work presentation, a difficult conversation, or a medical procedure, it can be adaptive to set an emotion aside temporarily. The problem arises when suppression becomes the default strategy for all emotional experiences. Research in emotional regulation consistently shows that chronic suppression is linked to increased physiological arousal, memory impairment, and lower relationship satisfaction.

Avoidance also tends to narrow a person's life. If someone copes with social anxiety by avoiding parties, they never learn that parties can be safe or enjoyable. If they cope with grief by staying busy, they never process the loss. The coping skill itself becomes a barrier to growth. This is why it is so important for clinicians to assess not just what coping skills a client uses, but how and why they use them. A skill that is used to avoid is different from a skill that is used to regulate.

Distress tolerance and the middle ground

Distress tolerance skills, often taught in dialectical behavior therapy, offer a useful middle ground. They are designed to help a person survive a crisis without making things worse, but they do not require the person to suppress the emotion entirely. Skills like self-soothing, distraction, and radical acceptance allow the person to ride out intense feelings while still acknowledging their presence. The goal is not to eliminate the distress but to endure it without resorting to harmful behaviors.

These skills are especially helpful when the emotion is too intense to process in the moment. A person in the middle of a panic attack is not in a position to explore the root cause of their fear. They need grounding first, something to anchor them in the present. But once the intensity drops, the work of supporting the emotion can begin. This is where the skill set shifts from crisis management to emotional processing.

For therapists, this means thinking about coping skills as part of a larger strategy. A client might need different tools at different times. The same person who uses grounding during a flashback might later benefit from journaling or talking through the memory with a therapist. The skill is not good or bad in itself; its value depends on how it serves the person's overall emotional health.

Practical ways to shift toward supportive coping

One of the most effective ways to help clients move from suppression to support is to teach them to notice the difference. A simple question like "Are you trying to make this feeling go away, or are you trying to understand it?" can open up a new perspective. Self-monitoring, tracking when and how they use coping skills, can reveal patterns of avoidance that the client may not have recognized.

Another approach is to pair coping skills with reflection. After using a breathing exercise or a grounding technique, the client can take a moment to notice what changed. Did the feeling go away? Did it shift? Did it stay the same? This kind of reflection turns a coping skill into a learning tool rather than a shutdown mechanism. It also builds interoceptive awareness, which is a foundation for emotional regulation.

Mindfulness practices are particularly useful here because they train the mind to stay with experience rather than flee from it. A simple practice like noticing the breath while also noticing the emotion can help the client hold both at once. Over time, this builds the capacity to tolerate discomfort without needing to escape it. The emotion is still there, but it no longer feels overwhelming.

For clinicians looking to deepen their approach, there are many resources for teaching coping skills that emphasize emotional support over suppression. These include structured curricula, guided exercises, and frameworks that integrate mindfulness, distress tolerance, and interoception. The best resources help the therapist tailor the skill to the individual client rather than offering a one-size-fits-all solution.

What this means for the helping professional

Understanding the difference between supportive and suppressive coping changes how a therapist designs interventions. It shifts the focus from symptom reduction to skill building. Instead of asking "How can I make this client feel better?" the therapist asks "How can I help this client relate to their emotions in a healthier way?" This is a subtle but powerful shift that aligns with the core values of many therapeutic traditions.

It also means that the therapist's own coping matters. Clinicians who model emotional presence rather than avoidance create a safer space for clients to do the same. Supervision, peer consultation, and personal therapy all play a role in helping therapists stay grounded without shutting down. The ability to sit with a client's pain without trying to fix it is a skill in itself, one that requires practice and support.

As the field continues to evolve, there is growing recognition that emotional health is not about feeling good all the time. It is about having the skills to feel the full range of human experience without being overwhelmed by it. Coping skills that support rather than suppress emotions are

a key part of that picture. They help clients build resilience not by avoiding discomfort but by learning to move through it with awareness and self-compassion.

For therapists who want to expand their toolkit, exploring **resources for teaching coping skills** that focus on emotional support can be a valuable step. These materials often include exercises for grounding, mindfulness, and distress tolerance that are designed to work with the emotion rather than against it. They also offer guidance on how to introduce these concepts in a way that feels safe and accessible to clients who may be used to suppressing their feelings. With the right approach, coping skills become a bridge to deeper self-understanding rather than a wall against emotional experience.