Hope or Cope

Intention

In this session it is intended that students:

- describe a range of coping strategies available to those encountering stressful or challenging situations
- identify some of their own preferred coping strategies
- compare different coping strategies in the context of particular scenarios, identifying those likely to be useful and those less likely to be useful
- assess some of the possible effects stressful circumstances can have on the physical, social and mental health of individuals and groups.

Resources

- Activity sheet: Cope cards – cut into separate cards
- Activity sheet: Bunches of fives

How to

ACTIVITY 1: Identifying coping strategies

1. Remind students that in previous sessions they identified the sorts of things people can feel stressed about, and some of the thoughts and feelings they can have when faced with challenging or stressful circumstances. In this session they are going to look at the various strategies people use to cope with situations of challenge, change or stress.

2. Use a paired sharing structure (turn to the person next to you, or make a trio if the numbers work that way) and ask students to swap some examples of things they like to do when they feel stressed or overworked.

Different people, different reactions

It is important to normalise the fact that people react differently. What one person finds very stressful may not concern another. An exam can worry one person more than another. Even in a family, parents separating can affect one member of the family more than another.

Paired sharing

A technique for maximising involvement and participation. Complete prior to a whole class discussion so students have had time to think and speak before talking in front of the whole class.
3. Ask around the room and record one of the strategies mentioned in each group (use a scribe to write down one strategy per slip of paper). Acknowledge the variety. Add these to the cope cards collection for the next activity.

**Teacher talk**

Explain that the things people do in response to stress or challenge are called coping strategies. Point out that you will be dealing today with a huge breadth and variety of coping strategies. Looking at the range is important because there is no one right way of coping – people who cope effectively have a whole range of things they do, using different responses in different situations. People learn to cope more effectively as part of growing up; they can learn a lot about how to cope from watching what their friends and family do.

**ACTIVITY 2: Coping collections**

(Use the Activity sheet: Cope cards)

1. Seat the class in a circle. Explain that the cards that are spread face up on the floor are ‘cope cards’– each one has on it a coping strategy that people sometimes use to help them deal with challenge or stress. When they are spread out, ask all students to choose two cards each (collect and remove the rest).

2. Ask students to choose one of the cards and to hold this one up at chest height so it can be read by others.

3. Explain to the class that you will describe a situation of potential stress or challenge. They will then be asked to move to a defined place in the room according to whether they think their coping strategy would be:

   - helpful
   - not much use
   - useless
   - harmful.
4. Describe a scenario (you may wish to choose from the brainstorm list generated in session 1):
   - faced with a big exam
   - dealing with separation of parents
   - confronted by a drunk stranger.

5. When students have grouped, have them compare and comment on their choices. Then ask them to put their other coping card on top and regroup if they think this card belongs to a different category.

6. Play a few rounds of the game to emphasise the point that different situations may call for different coping strategies. (Allow humour and dispute to arise. There are no right or wrong answers here.)

7. Use the following questions to assist in exploring issues around choice of coping strategies.

**Sample questions**
- When could a response like ‘work harder’ be an unhealthy thing to do?
- When can responses like ‘ignoring the problem’ or ‘partying’ be useful?
- Is using only one strategy the best way to handle a situation?
- Many people feel lonely when they are down – what can be done at times like this?

**Teacher talk**

Each of us has a range of different ways to cope, and often we use a different coping strategy according to what the situation is. An important thing to aim for is to have a lot of different coping strategies so that you are not depending on one or two that are not suited to a particular situation.

It is also important to know when to get support or help for yourself or someone else.
ACTIVITY 3: Bunch of fives

1. Explain to students that in this activity they will be building a combination or collection of coping strategies as a recommended response to a challenging situation. Point out that challenges are often ongoing, and that people often have to deal with them for long periods of time. Having more than one coping strategy could be essential to health or success.

2. Give out the Activity sheet: Bunches of fives. Students will use this worksheet as a place to design and record a collection of coping strategies which would be useful in particular situations.

3. From the brainstorm list generated in session 1, each student should choose three stressful or challenging situations. Encourage them to choose ones which they or their friends are likely to encounter one day.

4. For each of the three situations, students must design five different coping options which they feel to be a healthy response (one that won’t hurt yourself or others, or make the situation worse). They can select from the range seen in the previous class activity. There are some prompts around the edge of the page.

A Mental Health Promotion strategy

Provide private areas for talk