Coping Strategies for Stress Management

This resource explores coping strategies and options that may better support your long-term wellbeing.

Stress Management | PSP | Leaders | Supporters | Worksheet

20 min read

Introduction

Public safety work comes with unique pressures that can affect mental health over time. Becoming aware of how stress shows up, and how we cope with it, can be helpful for maintaining wellbeing.

Coping strategies are the thoughts and actions we use to manage stress, emotions, thoughts, and challenges, both on and off the job. Some strategies may work well in the short term at work but may not support wellbeing over time, particularly outside of work and in our personal lives.

Who It's For

- Public safety leaders and supervisors
- Public Safety Personnel (PSP)
- Families, partners, and supporters of PSP

When to Use This Resource

- During periods of increased stress or workload
- After challenging or emotionally demanding events
- As part of leadership check-ins or team discussions
- For personal reflection or conversations with co-workers, family, and friends
- When supporting someone who may be struggling

If distress is persistent, overwhelming, or interfering with daily functioning, **additional support from a trained professional is recommended.**

Purpose of This Worksheet

This worksheet is designed to support awareness, reflection, and conversation about how people cope with stress in public safety roles. It encourages noticing current coping strategies, reflecting on how those strategies are working over time, and exploring additional options that may better support recovery, connection, and wellbeing.

Specifically, this worksheet aims to:

- Increase awareness of common coping strategies used on and off the job
- Distinguish between coping strategies that may be helpful at work and outside of work
- Support reflection on when coping strategies are helpful — and when they may become less effective
- Encourage exploration of coping strategies that support long-term wellbeing
- Promote small, realistic steps toward healthier coping
- Provide a shared, non-judgmental language for discussing coping, stress, and mental health

The goal is not to label coping strategies as "good" or "bad," but rather to build insight — supporting healthier responses and earlier help-seeking when needed.

Disclaimer

This resource is not a diagnostic or treatment tool. It is instead intended to support reflection and conversation and should be used to complement — not replace — professional supports. You are encouraged to experiment with what feels relevant and to build and maintain the healthy habits you learn through practice and reuse.



If you or someone you know is in crisis, contact:

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- 9-8-8 – Suicide Crisis Helpline (24/7)
- ConnexOntario – 1-866-531-2600 (mental health and addictions)
- Peer Support: Boots on the Ground – 1-833-677-2668
- Warrior Health Peer Support

What Are Coping Strategies?

Coping strategies are ways people respond to stress, pressure, and emotional pain. Many coping strategies develop naturally in demanding roles and can be very effective in high-stress or urgent situations — helping people stay focused, get through difficult tasks, and maintain functioning on the job.

For example, an emergency communications officer may re-frame a distressing call by focussing simply on the facts instead of emotions in order to remain highly focused throughout the duration of the interaction. In the moment, this approach helps them gather critical information, give clear instructions, and manage multiple demands. In high-pressure situations, this coping strategy supports effective performance on the job.

Pushing Through Isn't the Answer

Over time, however, some strategies that work well on the job may not support wellbeing, connection, and recovery outside of work — particularly when stress is ongoing. What helps someone "push through" in the short-term may later contribute to exhaustion, emotional distance from loved ones, and difficulty connecting. These strategies, though helpful at the time, may make stress harder to recover from. Recognizing how coping strategies work — and when they may need adjustment — can support healthier responses and earlier help-seeking.

How do you Currently Cope With Stress?

The diagram on the next page illustrates various coping strategies, showing how some tend to better support wellbeing over time, while others may be helpful in the moment but less effective when relied on long-term.

Take some time to reflect on these strategies.

1. Which of these strategies have you used?
2. When and where were they helpful? When and where were they not helpful?
3. How does this reflection motivate you to seek out new and more effective coping strategies?



Image Credit: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources

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Common Ways to Cope with Stress

MORE EFFECTIVE COPING

Mindfulness

Involves being fully aware of the present moment, without judgement.

Problem-Focused Coping

Involves actively addressing the source of stress, and taking reasonable steps that may lead to solutions.

Social Support

Seeking support from friends, family, or support groups fosters connection and provides emotional relief.

Utilizing Resources

Engaging with available resources, such as professional counseling or therapy



LESS EFFECTIVE COPING

Rumination

Repeatedly focusing on distressing thoughts without taking steps to resolve them.

Venting

Venting, when done excessively and without a goal of finding solutions, can reinforce negative emotions rather than relieve them.

Substance Use

Turning to alcohol or drugs—may offer short-term relief but often results in dependency and worsens mental health over time

Avoidance

Steering clear of stressors instead of confronting them can prolong stress and hinder personal growth.

Explore More Effective Coping Stratigies

Below are examples of coping strategies that may help manage stress more effectively over time. These are often called adaptive coping strategies.

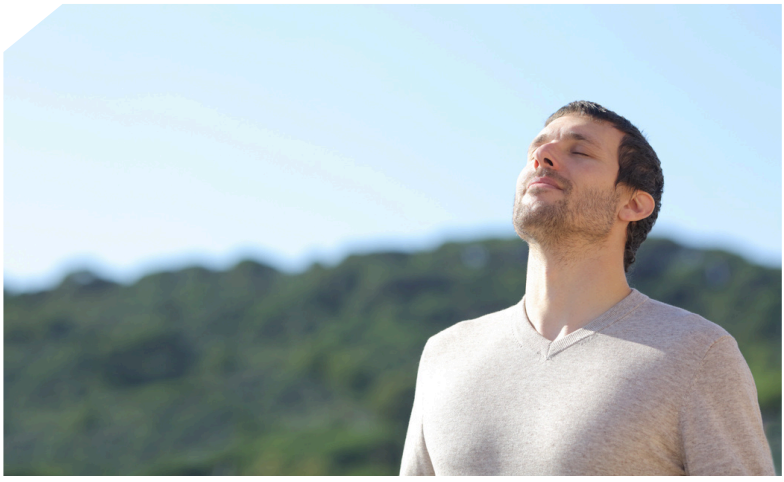
Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves being fully aware of the present moment with openness and without judgment. Techniques like meditation and deep breathing can help individuals stay grounded and attentive to their thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. It's a skill that anyone can develop, and it encourages noticing your surroundings and inner experiences with acceptance. Mindfulness is like a muscle – the more you practice and build up your "muscle", the stronger and more automatic mindfulness will become. Practicing mindfulness can offer several benefits, including:

- Improved concentration and attention
- Lower stress levels
- Reductions in systolic blood pressure
- Reduced anxiety
- A stronger sense of calm and wellbeing

Practical Strategies

- Practice box breathing: Inhale for 4 seconds, hold for 4, exhale for 4, hold again for 4 — then repeat. (Explore instructions)
- Take a mindful walk in nature, engaging all five senses — sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.
- If you feel comfortable, practice the body scan, by tuning into your body and noticing any sensations you are feeling without judgement. (Explore instructions)
- Practice daily meditation/mindfulness for 10-15 minutes. Try mindfulness apps to guide your practice, or visit **www.publicsafetymentalhealth.ca** and search "mindfulness and stress reduction".



A note on Mindfulness

Please note that mindfulness exercises, including noticing bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings, can be triggering for some people with a history of trauma, including sexual assault and physical violence. Please use these exercises only as you feel comfortable and seek professional support, as needed, to help you incorporate trauma-informed mindfulness practices. Be gentle with yourself as you incorporate mindfulness practices.

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Problem-Focused Coping

Problem-focused coping may sound negative, but it involves actively addressing sources of stress through planning and practical steps, which can lead to effective solutions.

Practical Strategies

- Create a step-by-step action plan to address the issue/stressor
- Break down large problems into smaller, manageable tasks
- Talk through a problem with a friend — with the goal of coming up with one small solution or next step
- Set SMART goals

SMART Goals

SMART goals are goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound.

Think about a SMART goal you would like to incorporate into your wellbeing routine (e.g., when I am home, I will walk my dog every evening after dinner, and use this time to practice engaging all five senses — sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste so I can feel more grounded after my shifts). Use the checklist below to turn a wellbeing goal into a SMART goal.

SMART Element	Guiding Questions	Your Notes
S - Specific	What will be accomplished? What actions will you take?	
M - Measureable	How will you know the goal is achieved? How much or how often?	
A - Achievable	Is the goal realistic right now? Do you have the skills and resources needed?	
R - Relevant	Why does this goal matter to your wellbeing? How does it align with broader goals?	
T - Time Bound	When will you start? How long will you try this for?	

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SMART GOALS EXAMPLE

Goal: Grounding on the drive home

SMART Element	Guiding Questions	Your Notes (*example*)
S - Specific	What will be accomplished? What actions will you take?	*During my drive home after a shift, I will name 3 things I can see outside the vehicle and 2 things I can hear (e.g., road sounds, the engine, or the radio) to help me decompress.*
M - Measureable	How will you know the goal is achieved? How much or how often?	*I do this once on every drive home after a shift.*
A - Achievable	Is the goal realistic right now? Do you have the skills and resources needed?	*Yes. This can be done while driving and does not require extra time or equipment.*
R - Relevant	Why does this goal matter to your wellbeing? How does it align with broader goals?	*It helps me transition from operational mode to home life and reduces stress carried over from the shift.*
T - Time Bound	When will you start? How long will you try this for?	*I will start this week and practise it for the next 2–3 weeks.*

Reflection Questions

What parts of this goal are within your control?
Who could help support you (e.g., family, friends, coworkers)?
What might get in the way, and how could you plan for it?

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Social Support

During and after traumatic events, we need other people. Seeking support from friends, family, or support groups can foster connection and provide emotional relief. When reaching out, it can be helpful to be mindful of your intention. You may be looking for emotional support or validation, or you may need practical help. Support can take many forms, and different needs may come up at different times.

Social connections take time and energy to build and maintain. Investing this time and effort pays off in forming trusted relationships with others.

Practical Strategies

- Schedule regular check-ins with friends and family.
- Reach out to peers for support, join support groups or online communities.
- Coordinate practical support with friends or family during high-stress periods (e.g., school pickups, meal prep, walking the dog).
- Seek professional counseling when needed.

Think about your social connections and ask:

Where do you see strengths and what areas would you like to build up?



Start by:

Looking at your current relationships:
- Think about the people who are already in your life.
- This might include family, friends, co-workers, or neighbours.
- Ask yourself: Can I turn to them for support?

Finding community social supports:
- Are there nearby groups and organizations you can join?
- Look for clubs, groups, teams, committees, online forums, and more.

Connecting with cultural and identity-based organizations:
- Are any groups related to your culture, identity, or religion?
- This might include family, friends, and others who share your values or beliefs.

Mapping out your social connections using the social connections map below:
- Write down or draw a diagram of the connections you have just identified.
- Include people and groups from across your personal, community, and cultural areas.

Planning to connect:
- Select one connection to reach out to first.
- Make a plan to do that using the SMART method above: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.

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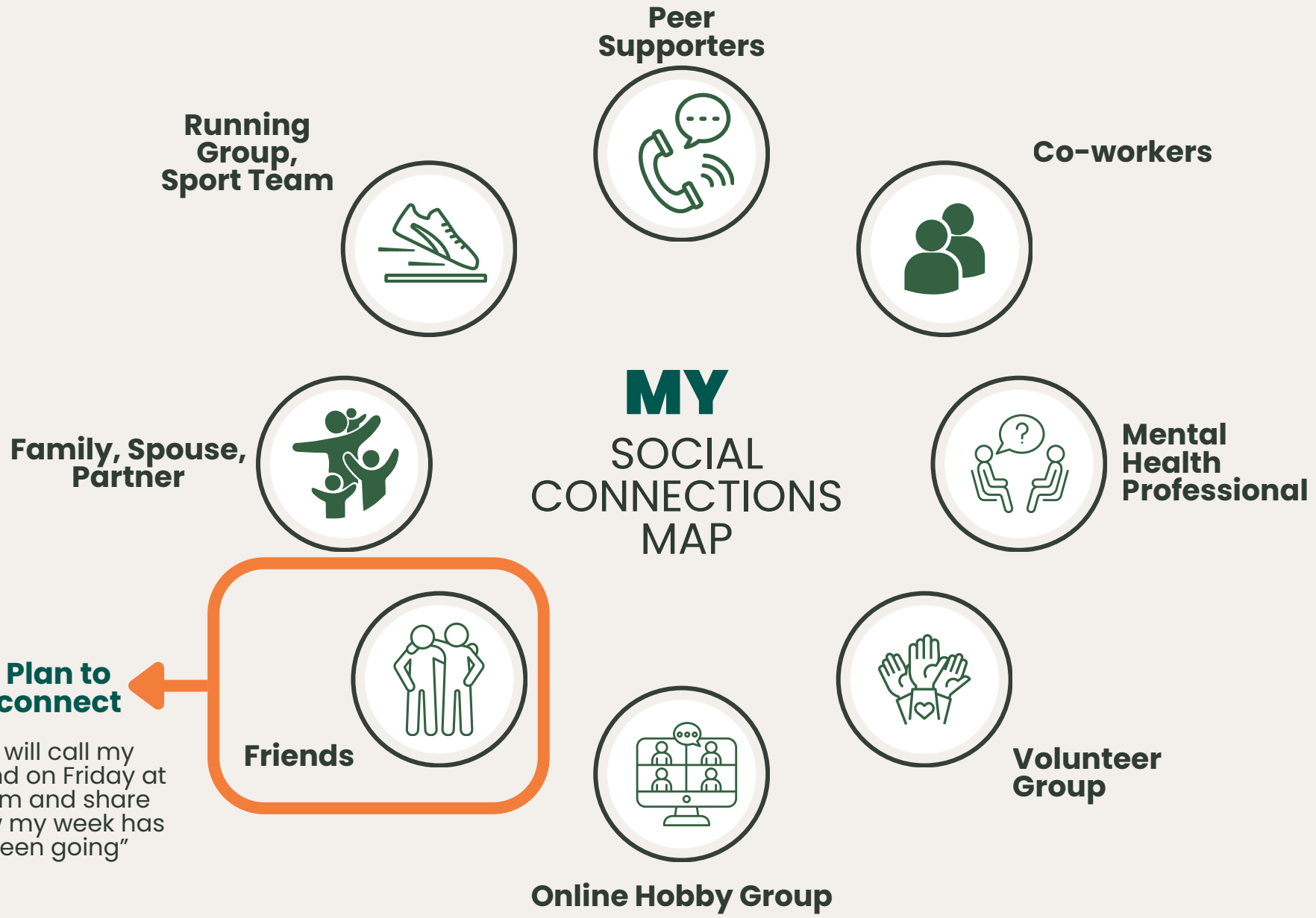
Example of a social connections map



Adapted from content developed by CanEMERG's Building Social Connections resource, available through the Canadian Emergency Response and Preparedness initiative

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Utilizing Resources

Everyone needs a mental health check-in to see how they are doing and to help determine when to reach out for supports. There are publicly available tools, like the Mental Health Continuum Self Check and Warrior-Health's Self Assessment, that can help you to check your mental health. You can use these tools to identify signs and symptoms of mental health concerns and to determine whether you are experiencing:

- Healthy, adaptive coping
- Reacting with mild and reversible distress or functional impairment
- Severely, persistently injured or impaired
- Clinically ill or disordered and requiring concentrated medical care

Engaging with available resources, such as professional counseling or therapy, can offer guidance and coping tools tailored to your individual needs.



Remember, if you or someone else you know is experiencing thoughts of self-harm or suicide**, call or text 9-8-8 or proceed to your nearest emergency room for assistance.**

Practical Strategies

- Research and identify available resources for support.
- Review national databases of free mental health and wellbeing supports for public safety personnel or see our website **(Service Directory)**
- Check online resource hubs or postings to help determine what supports are available in your workplace or community to support your wellbeing.
- Inquire with a healthcare provider, leader, or trusted resource person (e.g., your chaplain or union) about what resources are available in your workplace or community to support your wellbeing.
- Work with your employer (e.g., human resources department) to determine what insurance coverage is available to you (e.g., number of sessions; provider).
- Engage with professional counseling or therapy services appropriate for your needs.

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Emotion Focused Coping

Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT), developed by Leslie Greenberg, reinforces this perspective by emphasizing that emotions themselves can be important sources of insight and healing. When individuals learn to process and understand their emotions — rather than suppress or avoid them — they may experience meaningful personal growth.

Emotion-focused coping can be adaptive when it helps individuals manage emotional responses in healthy ways — particularly in situations where the stressor is uncontrollable or cannot be changed. In these cases, the goal is not to fix the problem, but to regulate emotional distress.

Emotion-focused coping is especially useful when a person perceives a situation beyond their control, such as following a traumatic event or during a natural disaster. Adaptive emotion-focused strategies include **cognitive reappraisal**[1], **acceptance**[2], mindfulness, and seeking support. These approaches can reduce emotional distress, strengthen psychological resilience, and support long-term wellbeing.

It is important to remember that **not all emotion-focused strategies will work for everyone.** For some people, emotion-focused coping can become less helpful when it leads to avoidance or rumination. However, it is adaptive when it helps us to regulate our emotions, especially in situations where direct action is not possible. Try experimenting with these strategies to see what works best for you, and what situation it is helpful/unhelpful.



Additional Emotional Coping Strategies That Support Wellbeing

- **Talking to someone:** Sharing feelings with a trusted friend, peer, family member, or therapist.
- **Journaling:** Writing down thoughts and emotions to process them more clearly.
- **Engaging in creative outlets:** Drawing, painting, music, or crafting to express and release emotions.
- **Physical activity:** Exercising to boost mood and reduce stress hormones.
- **Spiritual or religious practices:** Praying, attending services, sharing circles, or reading spiritual texts for comfort.
- **Crying:** Allowing oneself to release emotions through tears in a safe space.

[1] **Cognitive reappraisal** helps interrupt the cycle between automatic negative thoughts and overwhelming emotions. For example, the thought "I screwed up" after a difficult call can trigger shame, despair, or sadness. Cognitive reappraisal involves stepping back and reframing the situation more realistically, such as recognizing what was outside your control and focusing on learning for next time. For example, "a lot of things happened this evening that were outside of my control. I can learn from this and prepare for next time." Challenging the thought helps reduce emotional intensity, break the cycle, and return to your emotional baseline.

[2] **Acceptance** takes a different approach. Instead of trying to change emotions, it involves noticing and accepting them as they are, without trying to change them. Emotions rise and fall like waves - they intensify, peak, and pass. By observing, naming, and being curious about emotions (e.g., using a feelings wheel), distress can be experienced without being overwhelmed.

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Less Effective Coping Strategies

Less effective coping strategies, often called maladaptive coping strategies, are attempts to manage emotional distress rather than address the source of stress. While these coping strategies can provide short-term relief, they often lead to avoidance of the underlying issues, perpetuating the cycle of stress.

Below are types of less effective coping strategies that, in some instances, can be harmful:

- **Rumination:** Rumination involves repeatedly focusing on distressing thoughts without taking steps to resolve them. This pattern can intensify feelings of anxiety and depression and interfere with effective problem-solving.
- **Venting:** Venting, when done excessively and without a goal of finding solutions, can reinforce negative emotions rather than relieve them. It may lead to a cycle of emotional escalation instead of resolution.
- **Substance Use:** Substance use as a coping mechanism — such consuming alcohol or drugs — may offer short-term relief but often results in dependency and worsens mental health over time. Substance use also prevents individuals from addressing the root causes of their stress.
- **Avoiding Stressors:** In some instances, steering clear of stressors instead of confronting them can prolong stress and hinder personal growth.
- **Avoiding Emotions:** Emotional disconnection can help in high-stress work situations. However, relying on disconnection can make it harder to process experiences, shift out of work mode, or reconnect at home, increasing strain and isolation.
- **Disordered Eating:** Overeating or undereating as a response to stress can lead to physical health issues and distress.



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Worksheet: Exploring How You Cope

It is important to remember that not all coping strategies will work for everyone. Using this worksheet, first begin to notice how you cope. Reflect on how your current coping strategies are helpful or harmful. Next, try experimenting with the coping strategies below to see what works best for you. There are four parts to this worksheet

Part 1: Noticing How You Cope

Think about some recent stressful situations that you've experienced in the last month.

How did you manage your stress in those situations? (Check all that apply.)

□ Stayed busy or distracted

□ Breathed through it and stay in the present

□ Took action to solve the problem(s)

□ Over-thought about it or replayed the stressful event in your head

□ Sought support and talked it out

□ Avoided people or conversations

□ Vented to my friends or partner

□ Sought constructive peer support

□ Sought counselling

□ Used substances or alcohol to cope

□ Withdrew emotionally and "moved on"

□ Other:

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Part 2: When Coping Strategies Are Helpful

Some coping strategies are helpful for us over time. Reflect on the same strategies you listed in the previous section:

1. Do any of these make it easier to recover after work? □ Yes □ No
2. Do any affect your relationships or home life in a positive way? □ Yes □ No
3. Do any lessen exhaustion, isolation, or stress over time? □ Yes □ No

If yes, which ones and how do they help?

Part 3: When Coping Strategies Become Less Helpful

Some coping strategies can become harmful for us over time.
Reflect on the same strategies you listed above:

1. Do any of these make it harder to recover after work? □ Yes □ No
2. Do any affect your relationships or home life in a negative way? □ Yes □ No
3. Do any increase exhaustion, isolation, or stress over time? □ Yes □ No

If yes, which ones and how do they hinder?

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Part 4: Exploring More Effective Coping Strategies

Some coping strategies support recovery, connection, and wellbeing over time. Which of the following do you think could help you manage stress in a more effective way in the future, even if just a little bit? (Check any that apply.)

□ Talking with someone I trust

□ Physical activity or movement

□ Mindfulness, grounding exercises, or breathing exercises

□ Problem-solving or planning

□ Creative outlets (music, writing, art)

□ Spending more time in nature

□ Feeling my emotions and naming them (e.g., journaling or speaking to a friend, or aloud to yourself)

□ Spiritual or cultural practices

□ Peer support

□ Professional support

□ Other:

Which strategies would you like to use more often?

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Part 5: Small Steps Forward

You don't need to change everything at once:

One coping strategy I could try or strengthen this week:

One person or support I could reach out to if stress builds:

Reminder

Awareness creates insight. Noticing your coping strategies can help you make small, intentional shifts that can better support your wellbeing.

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This resources was developed in partnership with Trauma & Recovery Research Unit