

# Teaching Cognitive Coping and Self-Regulation Skills to Learners



## COGNITIVE BEHAVIORAL / INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES RESOURCE SERIES

Cognitive coping and self-regulation skills fall under the evidence-based practice of Cognitive Behavioral/Instructional Strategies (CBIS). For an overview of CBIS interventions, please see the tip sheet entitled [“Overview of Cognitive Behavioral / Instructional Strategies \(CBIS\).”](#)

**Self-regulation** is defined as the act of managing one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to both adapt to a given context and enable goal-directed behavior (Frei, et. al., 2021). Cognitive coping and self-regulation skills teach learners ways to manage feelings of stress and difficult emotions and cope with the cognitive aspects of stress and difficult emotions through thought-based strategies. These skills can be explicitly taught to all students, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, to support their behavioral and adaptive functioning across contexts (What Issues Connected to I/DD, 2022).

<p><b>HOW DO COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS CONNECT TO TN SOCIAL &amp; PERSONAL COMPETENCIES (SPCs)?</b></p>	<p>Cognitive coping and self-regulation skills are strategies learners can use to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in adaptive ways and across different situations. These skills fall directly under the Tennessee Social &amp; Personal Competency (TN SPC) of Self-management. According to the TN SPC standards, <b>“Self-management</b> is the ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself, and setting and working towards achieving personal and academic goals.” (TN SPC Resource Guide, 2017).</p>
<p><b>STUDENT OUTCOMES OF LEARNING COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS</b></p>	<p>Through learning and practicing cognitive coping and self-regulation skills, learners will understand and use strategies for managing their emotions and behaviors constructively. Specifically, learners will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> learn specific cognitive coping strategies to support self-regulation, and</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> employ cognitive coping strategies to improve self-regulation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>WHEN TO TEACH COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS</b></p>	<p>Cognitive coping and self-regulation skills should be introduced when the student is in a ready-to-learn mindset with their baseline level of calm and cognitive engagement. Cognitive coping and self-regulation skills are <b>not</b> taught when a student is dysregulated and avoidant. Once learned, these skills are practiced gradually from baseline calm situations to lower levels of emotion and up to medium and high levels of in-the-moment emotion.</p>
<p><b>HOW TO TEACH COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS</b></p>	<p>It can be helpful for learners to have a basic understanding of emotions and their adaptive purpose prior to learning cognitive coping and self-regulation strategies. It can also be helpful to be familiar with the cognitive triangle and how thoughts relate to feelings and behaviors. However, emotion awareness is not necessarily a prerequisite for learning cognitive coping and self-regulation skills. In fact, some learners, including autistic students and students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, may struggle to label their emotions, but can still benefit from engaging in some cognitive coping and self-regulation strategies, as these strategies can help influence the emotions and introduce more behavior choices.</p> <p>When it comes to teaching cognitive coping and self-regulation skills, we want to teach these the same way we teach academic skills, such as reading and math. It’s important to describe the skill and provide a rationale for its use, model or demonstrate the skill, provide opportunities for the student to role-play or practice the skill with feedback, and then provide ongoing, frequent opportunities for the student to practice the skill daily.</p> <p>Often, the important step of frequent and ongoing practice gets left out of the teaching process. This step is important for several reasons. First, frequent opportunities to practice are required for any student to become</p>

<p><b>HOW TO TEACH COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS</b></p> <p>CONTINUED</p>	<p>fluent in the use of these skills and to be able to effectively use them when needed (e.g., at times of increased stress or emotionality). Second, as noted above, students need to practice these skills when they are in a calm, well-regulated state and when they are experiencing low levels of difficult emotions. Without fluency practice when students are calm and well-regulated, prompts to practice these skills when students are at higher levels of emotion will likely escalate the student’s already dysregulated state. Instead, having students practice cognitive coping and self-regulation skills while they are calm and then having them practice during gradually heightened levels of emotionality will allow them to experience incremental success with self-regulation. Just like learning to read or play an instrument, building fluency with cognitive coping skills takes time and practice.</p>
<p><b>TEACHING COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS IN ACTION</b></p>	<p>Please review our associated <b>Intervention Planning Guides</b> for specific guidance on implementing and monitoring intervention(s) associated with teaching cognitive coping and self-regulation skills to students. Intervention Planning Guides on this topic include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Challenging Unhelpful Thoughts; previous familiarity with the Cognitive Triangle will be important for students practicing this strategy (see Emotion Awareness Lesson Plans),</li> <li>❑ Grounding exercises; see The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine’s <i>Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Children: Calming Your Mind</i>, <a href="https://youtu.be/L8k7ydvVtIE">https://youtu.be/L8k7ydvVtIE</a>, and</li> <li>❑ Affirmative Phrase Power Cards; also see OCALI Autism Center online materials related to Power Cards: <a href="http://www.ocali.org/project/resource_gallery_of_interventions/page/Power-Cards">www.ocali.org/project/resource_gallery_of_interventions/page/Power-Cards</a>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING COGNITIVE COPING AND SELF-REGULATION SKILLS</b></p>	<p>Due to some of the language, communication, and cognitive challenges for some autistic students and students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, we want to be sure to describe and explain why cognitive coping and self-regulation skills are important and effective in ways that students will understand. We know that these skills are important for all students; we also know that autistic students and students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are at increased risk for developing emotional challenges and mental health concerns and can benefit from learning skills to support self-regulation. Explaining to students why and how these strategies work often helps increase student motivation to use the skills.</p> <p>Autistic students and those with intellectual and developmental disabilities also benefit from visual supports to understand abstract concepts and strategies. For certain cognitive coping and self-regulation strategies, such as grounding strategies, having a visual task analysis can be helpful to improve students’ learning of the steps and can also be used as a visual reminder or prompt for the student to use the strategy throughout their day.</p>

**CONSIDERATIONS  
FOR TEACHING  
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CONTINUED

When teaching any cognitive coping or self-regulation strategy, we want to be careful to avoid abstract terms or metaphorical language. Using concrete examples or comparisons can support student understanding. For example, for affirmative phrases, use characters and figures that are important for the student and have concrete examples from favorite books/movies/shows to illustrate ideas.

Planning for generalization will be important for increasing students' use of cognitive coping and self-regulation skills. Plan for frequent opportunities throughout a student's day where he/she can practice cognitive coping skills when he/she is calm and well-regulated. This could be at the beginning of a class period, at the end of a class period, or during a class-wide brain break. Planning these practice opportunities and having them on a student's daily schedule will support practice and normalize their use throughout the day. Consider connecting these practice opportunities with reinforcement to increase motivation while the student is building fluency.

**ADDITIONAL  
RESOURCES**

Educators may find it helpful to use the following external resources with multimedia presentation of mental health topics:

- ❑ The National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine's *Introduction to Tools for Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Children and Youth* ([https://youtu.be/Agy\\_nn54xC8](https://youtu.be/Agy_nn54xC8))
  - » Check out additional Tools for Supporting Emotional Wellbeing in Children and Youth: <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/other/dbasse/wellbeing-tools/interactive/>
  - » Videos illustrating cognitive behavioral concepts and interventions
- ❑ The *Nixie and Nimbo* video series and resources available through the Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/nixieandnimbo/>
  - » Age: upper elementary school
  - » Free downloaded resource guide for adults supporting child's emotion learning
  - » YouTube video links teaching emotion awareness skills and connecting to specific cognitive behavioral relaxation skills
- ❑ Visit *AnxietyCanada* ([www.anxietycanada.com/](http://www.anxietycanada.com/)) for information about childhood anxiety and tutorials for cognitive behavioral relaxation skills
- ❑ GoNoodle is a popular resource for promoting health and wellness. On GoNoodle-Flow ([www.gonoodle.com/tags/Wwjzlw/flow?tab=videos](http://www.gonoodle.com/tags/Wwjzlw/flow?tab=videos)) they also provide soothing video resources to teach cognitive behavioral relaxation skills.
- ❑ *The Incredible 5-Point Scale* by Buron and Curtis (2012)

## **TRIAD RESOURCES**

There are specific complexities when implementing CBIS, depending on student needs and behaviors. Consider attending a TRIAD webinar, workshop, or enrolling in a TRIAD consultation and coaching service line to support implementation. Learn more at [Triad.vumc.org/schools](https://www.complexmhidd-nc.org/physical-behavioral-healthcare/ebp-idd/cbt-issues).

## **REFERENCES**

Frei, A. and Herman-Stahl, M. (2021). *Co-Regulation in Practice Series*. OPRE Brief #2021-91, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

*What issues connected to I/DD suggest CBT as a treatment?* (2022). NC Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse Services, NC Complex MH/IDD Resources. Retrieved from <https://complexmhidd-nc.org/physical-behavioral-healthcare/ebp-idd/cbt-issues>