



Learn to Ride the Rapids

Life can have its rough and calmer waters. Learn to navigate the turbulent waters of living and manage your stress and anxiety. Change your "stinking thinking" to positive thoughts and learn to ride the rapids.

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Imagine preparing to embark on an exciting whitewater rafting adventure through a long, winding river. Your guide provides you with instructions in case you are accidentally thrown from the raft into the cold, frigid water. It goes against your instincts, but you are told not to attempt to climb back into the raft because it is too slippery and quickly moving downstream. Resisting the current by standing up in the water may result in injury if your feet get stuck in the rocks. Instead, you are instructed to stay calm, wrap your arms around your life vest as if you are hugging it, pull your feet up in front of you, and let the rapids carry you down the river until you are in quieter waters where the guides can help you return to the raft.

During the last year, dealing with the pandemic has been like learning to ride the rapids. We never imagined the twists and turns that we would take and how we would need to trust ourselves and others to help us through this difficult time. We learned that resistance was futile and learning to remain calm until we reached better times would be key in this recovery. For many of us, it felt like we were in emotional overload. This term is defined as a "state of being affected by intense emotion that is difficult to manage and can affect our ability to think and act rationally" according to [Good Therapy](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/7-creative-ways-to-turn-anxiety-into-productivity-0406167) (https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/7-creative-ways-to-turn-anxiety-into-productivity-0406167) (2016).

For many Americans, stress levels have been high. According to the [Kaiser Family Foundation](https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/) (https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/) (KFF), during the pandemic about "4 in 10 adults in the US have reported symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders, up from 1 in 10 adults who reported these symptoms" prior to the 2020 shutdown (Panchal, N., et. al, 2021). Reflecting on the effects of the pandemic on young adults, [KFF \(2021\)](https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/) (https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/) reported "anxiety, depression, sleep disruptions, and thoughts of suicide have increased" for ages 18-24 (Panchal, N., et. al, 2021).

Many of us are feeling fearful and helpless. Ongoing symptoms of anxiety over a period of several months can lead to an anxiety disorder warranting professional help. And high levels of anxiety over a long period of time can often lead to depression (Mental Health First Aid, 2021). However, anxiety is a normal reaction to stress and can be considered productive or beneficial to us in certain situations alerting us to possible dangers and motivating us to get things done. But unproductive stress differs from the normal feelings of nervousness and anxiousness causing us to avoid certain situations that trigger anxiety. This can affect our job performance and personal relationships (GoodTherapy, 2016). (<https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/7-creative-ways-to-turn-anxiety-into-productivity-0406167>)

If you are experiencing symptoms of anxiety, you are not alone. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (<https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/facts-statistics>) (2021), anxiety disorders are "the most common mental illness in the US, affecting 40 million adults." Those with common anxiety disorders such as certain phobias, generalized anxiety, panic, and obsessive-compulsive disorders are at greater risk during these stressful times (Mental Health First Aid USA, 2020). Fear of being alone, fear of illness, and fear of germs are magnified by the demands placed on us by the mitigation efforts. People experiencing social anxiety are faced with increased isolation and loneliness due to social distancing. Others are concerned about finances, caring for children and elderly parents, job insecurity, and food insecurity. There is so much to worry about.

Identifying problems in ourselves and others can be difficult. Considering that most of us are only seeing each other over video calls on our phones or computer, it hard for the average person to detect whether someone is being cautious or suffering from anxiety. And with more people working from home, how can we tell whether they are experiencing symptoms or just not motivated to get dressed up for the meeting? Many people are experiencing challenges, and we are often not aware of them.

It is important that we reach out to one another and ask, "How are you are doing?" or "How are you keeping busy?" Take time to express yourself about coping with the stress of our current lives, and encourage others to share. Learn to identify the signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and how to help others by registering for Adult Mental Health First Aid (<https://extension.psu.edu/catalogsearch/result/?q=mental+health+first+aid>). More information can be found on the Penn State Extension website.

Coping strategies are an effective way of working through difficult times. Our thinking plays a big part in how we feel. Negative or "stinking thinking" (<https://feelinggood.com/2014/01/06/secrets-of-self-esteem-2-negative-and-positive-distortions/>) can reinforce our anxiety (Burns, 2016). For example, stinking thinking includes having thoughts that the worst will happen, believing that life is unfair, or focusing on blaming others for the pandemic. It is easy to become trapped into a cycle of negativity and often automatic thinking. One effective way is to reframe your thoughts by using "positive reframing" (<https://psychcentral.com/lib/15-common-cognitive-distortions#The-Most-Common-Cognitive-Distortions>)" (Grohol, J.M., 2016).

Here are 5 positive reframing steps to change your "stinking thinking." It is called the 5 C's.

First, **catch it**. Recognize when you are having a negative or unhelpful thought.

Second, **control it**. When you find yourself thinking negatively, silently say "stop" to yourself to stop the downward spiral of thoughts leading to sadness, guilt, anxiety, self-doubt, or hurt.

Next, **challenge it**. Repeat the thought and ask yourself if this is realistic, is this based on facts, is there evidence to support my thinking? (Ackerman, 2021). (<https://positivepsychology.com/cbt-cognitive-restructuring-cognitive-distortions>) The answer to these questions will provide insight into whether these thoughts are positive or leading you to a dead end.

Next, **change it**. Rephrase or reframe the thought into something more positive such as "these times are difficult but there are more good times ahead."

And finally, the **last C is for cherishing**. "Take time to cherish every moment of your life, it is the greatest journey you will ever take" (Mona Lill, 2018) (<https://cherishlifemoments.com/cherish-every-moment/>). Enjoy the moment and the feeling you have just created.

Lessons from whitewater rafting can teach us to manage our fears, learn to trust ourselves, and rely on others to ride the rapids through the turbulent times until we reach calmer waters clearly ahead.

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Authors

Jacqueline Amor-Zitzelberger, MA

Extension Educator: Food, Families, and Health

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