

Making Products—and the World—More Accessible (PD 20)

Emotional/Mental Disabilities

The AccessAbility Special Interest Group (A-SIG) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), formed in 2002 as a successor to the Special Needs Committee, focuses on assisting people who have special needs, such as low vision, hearing loss, low mobility, cognitive difficulties, and other challenges by helping to accommodate their disabilities and making information more accessible to them. The A-SIG has been instrumental in helping people cope with barriers that impede the practice of technical communication for those with disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

This topic addresses some of the coping mechanisms that can be used to help people with emotional or mental disabilities. It's my belief that the most important thing for people to do is be proactive. In general, if people try to make their day-to-day activities as stress-free as possible, dealing with an emotion or mental disability can be easier. Because I've had to deal with depression for a number of years, I've learned many methods to deal with this disability. I believe several of these methods can be used effectively to help with any disability. By using positive self-talk, time management techniques, and coping mechanisms, and being flexible, taking control of the day can lessen or possibly eliminate stress.

POSITIVE SELF-TALK

One of the most important things you can do for yourself is to keep your thoughts positive and try to eliminate negative self-talk. This can be a useful aid for people with any type of disability.

A common problem for people who experience depression is the feeling of being overwhelmed by a situation. If you can change negative self-talk to positive self-talk, you can avoid getting overwhelmed and keep things in perspective. I've found that if you take a few minutes to analyze a troublesome situation, you can keep your self-talk positive. Just follow these few steps to analyze a situation:

- Make a chart with four columns entitled situation, thoughts, feelings, and alternate thoughts.

- In column one, list a situation. *Example:* I've been thinking about my daughter's recent foot pain. (Background: Last year, my daughter stepped off a curb and broke her foot. A pin was placed in her foot during surgery resulting in her using a wheelchair for six weeks.)
- In column two, write down your thoughts about the situation. *Example:* This could be serious. Will she need surgery again? Here's one more problem I have to cope with.
- In column three, write down your feelings. *Example:* I'm worried that this pain is serious and she'll need surgery again. I'm depressed that I have another problem to deal with.
- In column four, list some alternate thoughts. *Example:* Rather than worry about the situation, I need to make an appointment with the doctor to discuss my daughter's foot pain. I'm jumping ahead of myself worrying about surgery. If I take it one day at a time, I won't feel depressed about the situation.

As you can see in this situation, the column two thoughts (negative self-talk) have been replaced with the column four alternative thoughts (positive self-talk). (As an aside, in the above example, my daughter had surgery to remove the pin, which was causing the pain, but she didn't need to use a wheelchair again.) I realize that situation analysis can be time consuming at first, but the more you practice doing it, the less time it will take.

MANAGING YOUR TIME

Managing your time effectively can help you deal with your disability. In my experience, I've found that if you have some structure in your life, you'll be able to better cope with your disability. I believe that the following suggestions can help most people with any type of disability:

- Take 10 to 15 minutes each day to plan your next day. Depending on your circumstances, do your planning at the end of the work day or just prior to bedtime.
- Make a list of the activities that you want to accomplish for the day. Afterwards, prioritize the list by the most important item first or by due date.

- Take advantage of your own personal habits. If you're a morning person, schedule the longest or most difficult task first.
- Schedule a short (5 to 15 minutes) break each morning and afternoon. Taking a break can actually help you get more done because you return refreshed and your mind is clearer.

USE COPING MECHANISMS

There are several coping mechanisms that you can use to help you with your disability. If you interrupt the activity that is becoming stressful, you can prevent things from getting worse. Here are a few suggestions that I have found helpful:

- Humor can be one of the most effective ways to cope. If you can laugh at yourself when you make a mistake, you'll have a better chance of keeping your morale up and your stress down.
- Get up and walk around the room or do some stretches at your desk if you are sitting at a computer for any length of time.
- Exercise on a regular basis. A simple 20 minute walk three times a week can help you increase your energy level and help keep you in shape.
- Eat regularly and sensibly. This is a real basic suggestion. It's best to eat three meals or five small meals daily, which ensures that your body has enough energy for you to get through the day.

BE FLEXIBLE

It's important that you try to be as flexible as possible. You can have the best plan for the day, but then something comes up, and your entire schedule is thrown off. If an unexpected task arises, take a few minutes and reschedule your day. This way you can feel that you have control of your time and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

CONCLUSION

I believe that if you follow these suggestions, you can keep your day as stress-free as possible, accomplish your tasks, and keep your disability from interfering with your day-to-day activities.

Note: For more information regarding the AccessAbility SIG, check out our Web site at <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml>.

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Helen Marty has 30 years' experience in the technical communication field. After retiring IBM Corporation where she was a technical editor and writer, Marty graduated from the University of Arizona with a B.A in English. Marty has been a member of STC for 13 years and was a founding member of the Southern Arizona (SAZ) chapter and the AccessAbility SIG. She has served as a judge for PAO and newsletter competitions, and has presented at the SAZ chapter and the last three STC annual conferences.