

Coping in Difficult Circumstances---Some Ideas to Consider

Seek out trustworthy people to talk to—a religious counselor, health care practitioner, social worker, an ombudsperson—and friends and family. Build support relationships—find a relevant support group. Consider some of the options below with a trusted person.

- If in doubt about truth or dishonesty, consider telling the truth
- Prepare ahead, in any way you can, for a situation you think will be tough
- Set a routine for yourself
- Take action, even small actions—between action and passivity, consider choosing action
- Plan in small bits, if necessary—to get through the next week, the next day, or the next hour
- If possible, find something wonderful in your life (children, art, memories, music, colors, photographs, taking care of another person, or a pet or a garden, etc.)
- Is there anything you can do to create alternatives to the situation you are in (an escape, a fallback position, keep thinking of options, keep weighing these options)?
- Exercise if you are able (dance, run, swim, bicycle or whatever), in such a way as to raise your heart rate continuously for at least half an hour a day. Not only will you be fitter but you may raise your endorphin level to help deal with pain
- Learn and practice relaxation or meditation
- If all else fails, consider practicing denial, or short periods of distraction from grief or pain

LISTEN: Whatever happens, imagine that it is "data." Keep a journal, write poetry, or do any other kind of writing or composition that reaffirms your discussion with yourself, drawing on your own values. These views and feelings may be shared with a few trusted others.

- Develop a theory about what is happening to you, to help explain the experience (this offers some possible sense of protection, a sense of being able to anticipate or predict what may happen next, a bit of control, a way to dispel the fear of the unknown and sense of helplessness.¹)
- Develop a sense of humane stoicism. Try to maintain a sense inside yourself of sturdy values and caretaking. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad" —try to avoid being forced into madness or bitterness, or rigidity.
- Use humor—it will help break up self-righteousness in yourself and others and may create a bond of sympathy in an otherwise rigid system, or with otherwise hostile colleagues.
- Do not tangle emotionally with people who do not have your best interests at heart. It will entangle you in the world-view of the Other and make it harder to keep your own identity—"never meet hostility with hostility."
- Reinforce your own identity and values to yourself, in any way you can, with friends and family and inside your own head: ("I am a fair person, " "I am a good parent, " "I am accountable," "I do excellent work," "I believe in my religion," "I live for music.")

¹ These last five ideas are from Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, University of North Carolina Press, 1989.