

Coping with an Unexpected Event

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For some of our patients, COVID-19 is their first major life challenge, while for others it is one of many they have endured. Our poor friends in Evergreen now have yet another “adventure” to deal with, given the most recent wildfire. How do you cope with surprises and unexpected events? Do you experience stress, anxiety, panic, sadness, insomnia, scattered thinking, anger, and/or frustration? There are some people that actually thrive on change and the unexpected. Coping with unexpected events leaves them feeling excited, curious, invigorated, energized, motivated and creative.

The beauty in the diversity of the human experience is that we can learn from each other. Some people are naturally better at coping, others have had years of experience and learned. I noticed about ten years ago that my neighbor across the street never seems flustered. When a hail storm came through, broke all of our home windows, added leaks to the roof, and made swiss cheese of our cars, I asked her how she remained so calm. Her response, “I’m 78 years old. I’ve seen it all and I know I can get through it!” How do people who we would like to emulate behave so that we can too? Here are some tips for dealing with surprises and unexpected events.

1. Accept that Unexpected Things Happen

It’s a fact of life worth acknowledging. Surprises and unexpected events are part of life and unavoidable. Once one can accept this, it becomes easier to deal with whatever happens in your life. Life is dynamic and full of change. Years ago, I started calling unexpected events “adventures,” and it has definitely changed my mindset.

2. Make a Plan

How can you adjust to the new situation and either fix it, improve it, or make the most of it? Develop a plan to tackle the unexpected events under your control, and know that you can always create or have a plan B if necessary. Expect for everything to turn out well. This helps provide a sense of control in what might otherwise feel overwhelming. It will help allay fear and helplessness.

3. Acknowledge your Emotions

Pay attention to your reactions. Which of your reactions are emotional? What is your emotional response? Acknowledge that they are real and valid. Expect the phases of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, then acceptance. Determine how you wish to manage your emotions. Take a step back and try to better understand your emotions. This can be very calming. When you are calm, possessing inner peace, a bit of emotional detachment and inner strength, external events start to lose their power over you. You stop getting agitated and losing your composure when surprises enter your life.

At the talk we gave on depression, someone in our patient community told a great story. She is in her 70s and very happily married to her second husband. She said, “They tell you that the pain in your heart from the death of a spouse goes away. That is not true. It is like a hole in a tapestry. But over time, you build a bigger tapestry and it becomes a smaller portion of your life.”

4. Never React Immediately

Wait for a few moments before saying or acting when hearing unexpected news. Is your reaction based in logic and reason or is in an emotional response? Both are valid experiences, but you will likely want your actions to reflect a more measured response. Take a look at what is happening and take time to assimilate the news. Stay positive. Always, remember that “this also shall pass.” Are you about to model the behavior of the people you wish to emulate?

5. Power of Positivity

A positive attitude is a key in unexpected situations. Have you heard of the saying “a blessing in disguise?” Not all events are negative, and there are often positive things that result from change. Look for those positive changes. A negative event can awaken ambition, motivation, and persistence, which would lead to progress and success.

6. Trust in your Ability to be Okay

I’ve had times in my life where it felt like I had jumped off of a cliff. I was falling and I didn’t know how long I would fall, but I knew that I would always land on my feet. And you will too. You are not alone. Focus on long term goals. Learn from the unexpected event as much as you can and take advantage of new opportunities that come your way.