

Coping Strategies: Cold to the Face



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Summary: When stressed or anxious, one simple yet powerful coping strategy is to put intense cold on your face. You can do this in many ways, including 1) dunk your face in ice cold water, 2) splash water on your face, or 3) put on a cold ice pack, cold compress or frozen bag of peas, carrots, corn, etc.

How It Works

An ancient survival reflex wired into us is the “mammalian diving reflex.” It exists to help humans that might be in cold water and thus at risk of drowning.

When cold hits the face and nose, it sends signals to the parasympathetic nervous system (aka “rest and relaxation”) to slow your breathing and heart rate to preserve oxygen.

When used as a coping strategy, it reminds your body that this is not a life-threatening emergency, and when it slows down your breathing and your heart rate, it also helps you feel calmer and more relaxed.

This strategy is a classic strategy recommended in many types of therapies, including dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT).

How to Do It?

There are different ways to activate this reflex.

1) With water

- Splashing water on your face

- Using a bowl
 - Find a bowl that can fit your entire face.
 - Fill the bowl with cold water (and ice if you have it).
 - Put your face in the water for 10-15 seconds.



- Take a cold shower.



2) With something cold but not wet.

- Some people, especially those wearing makeup, might not want to get their face all wet. The good news is that you just need something cold.
- You can also use:
 - Cold compress,
 - Cold pack,
 - Frozen bag of peas, carrots, etc.



Repeat as necessary -- simply doing this once is generally not enough.

It Doesn't Work for Me!

Are you finding that it doesn't help you feel calmer?

Most likely its that you haven't yet been able to activate your "diving reflex" and thus the calming parasympathetic system.

Try again, perhaps with:

- Something colder and/or
- Covering a larger area of your face with cold, and/or
- For a larger time.

When to Consult a Health Professional

Do you have medical issues such as a low heart rate or trouble with fainting?

- If so, speak first to your doctor before trying this strategy.

Summary

When getting stressed or anxious, one simple yet powerful strategy is to put something cold on your face, which activates your parasympathetic nervous system to help you return to a calmer state.

References

Wikipedia contributors. Diving reflex. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. June 13, 2022, 08:36 UTC. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diving_reflex. Accessed October 24, 2022.

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