

Counselling and Well-Being Service

Breathing and Relaxation

Why do you need tips to breathe and relax?

When we get stressed over exams and other things going on in life it can get harder to think clearly.

Stress has many impacts on our physical and mental health and finding ways to combat that is important.

When we notice it our thoughts that cause stress becoming overwhelming it helps to focus on breathing techniques or ones that ground us in our body senses. The effect is we end up paying less attention to the thoughts that are driving the stress and it gives us a way to interrupt them.

Over the longer term it is also useful to build in practices that help stop the stress becoming so overwhelming in the first place.

Relaxation techniques and a form of meditation called mindfulness can help reduce stress levels if practiced daily.

There are many different forms, so this leaflet is just going to introduce you to a few or resources for you to explore in more detail.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a word you may have heard but what does it mean?

Practicing mindfulness is all about paying attention to the present moment. Shifting out of autopilot and awakening to the here and now. Mindfulness is about freeing yourself from regrets about the past and worries about the future.

You don't have to do anything strange or different and it can be done doing everyday tasks like brushing your teeth. Next time you brush your teeth, notice what the texture of the brush is like, the feel of it on your gums and tongue. The taste and smell of your toothpaste. How often do you brush your teeth while thinking about something else?

You can also follow some guided meditations that give you things to pay attention to and focus your thoughts on. When this is happening, we spent less time worrying about the past or future and it reduces our stress levels over time.

The website below has a lot of useful resources and some free meditations to listen to for you to get some experience of this.

<http://mindfulnessforteens.com/guided-meditations/>

Breathing techniques

When people feel anxious, they often take shallow and rapid breaths, which can induce physiological changes—like an increased heart rate—which can add to stress. One of the simplest relaxation exercises involves breathing.

Just a few deep breaths can provide an instant calming effect that can help reduce stress.

Below are a few variations of simple breathing exercises.

- 1 – Take a deep breath in through your nose and pay attention to what happens in your chest and belly. Then breathe out again and notice what is happening. Repeat a few times.
- 2 – Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Pay attention to the tip of your nose, the temperature and sensation of the air as it enters your body. Repeat this for a couple of minutes trying to keep your breathing nice and even. Don't worry if your mind wanders, when you notice just return your attention to the tip of your nose.
- 3 – 7/11. Breathe in through your nose to a count of 7 and notice your belly rising as you take the deep breath. When you breathe out through your mouth notice your belly falling and count to 11. (These don't have to be seconds. What's important is breathing out for long than you breathe in). Repeat for a couple of minutes.

Grounding techniques

Grounding exercises are helpful for many situations where you find yourself becoming overwhelmed or distracted, they can help bring you back down to earth.

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- 5: Notice FIVE things you see around you. Maybe it is a bird, maybe it is pencil, and maybe it is a spot on the ceiling, however big or small, notice 5 things you see.
- 4: Notice FOUR things you can touch around you. Maybe this is your hair, hands, ground, grass, pillow, whatever it may be, list out the 4 things you can feel.
- 3: Notice THREE things you hear. This needs to be external, do not focus on your thoughts; maybe you can hear a clock, a car or maybe you hear your tummy rumbling, what is audible in the moment is what you list.
- 2: Notice TWO things you can smell: This one might be hard if you are not in a stimulating environment, if you cannot automatically sniff something out, maybe walk nearby to find a scent. It could be as simple as leaning over and smelling a pillow on the couch, or a pencil or the shampoo in your hair. Take in the smells around you.
1. Notice ONE thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like, coffee, or the sandwich from lunch? Focus on your mouth as the last step and take in what you can taste.

There is a longer list of different exercises here.

<https://www.livingwell.org.au/well-being/mental-health/grounding-exercises/>

Relaxation techniques

When you feel tense, it's natural to hold onto that tension in the muscles of the body. Some common places to hold onto tension include the shoulders, neck, and jaw, but you might also have tension in areas like the legs, hips, and hands. One of the relaxation techniques you should know is progressive muscle relaxation, or PMR. This can allow you to focus on each body part, one at a time, and relax those muscles.

You can find many videos on YouTube that will walk you through the steps of a progressive muscle relaxation. A simple search will give you an idea of how many there are.

Start with a short one such as the one below which lasts for 5 minutes.

<https://youtu.be/8Xp2UzG7UYY>

You can then start on longer ones that focus on more areas of the body.

Did you notice how breathing, mindfulness, grounding, and relaxation are all very similar and that a lot of the exercises in one section uses exercises from another?

The more you practice one of them the easier they all become, and they will help you cope much easier with stress.