

Techniques & tools to manage and improve mental wellbeing





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Self-help tools for mental wellbeing

We understand how stressful life can be. Looking after your mental wellbeing is essential to living well. We have created this mental wellbeing tool pack to help you thrive in all areas of wellbeing. This guide will offer a range of different exercises and tools to help you maintain and improve your mental wellbeing. The tools include written activities and the practical exercises include mindfulness techniques such as mindfulness of breathing. We recommend you photocopy or print the exercises you wish to try so you can have them on hand when needed.

Please note this pack of self-help tools does not supplement professional support or treatment.

1. How to practice controlled breathing

Set aside some time when you will not be disturbed. Try to find a quiet and comfortable room which is a good temperature. This can be done by either sitting in a chair or lying down. If you do lie down, be careful not to fall asleep!

1. Start by noticing your breathing. Is it fast or slow? Deep or shallow? Just tune in to how you are breathing in this moment.



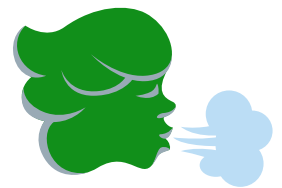
2. Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach. Breathe in slowly through your nose, allowing your stomach and chest to gently swell. You will know you are breathing deeply if both hands gently rise. There will be less movement in the hand on the chest.



3. Let each breath follow naturally. When the in breath has ended let the out breath happen when it is ready. Exhale slowly and gently. It can be helpful to imagine letting go of any anxieties you have with each out breath. Imagine the worries dissolving or floating away. As you breathe in imagine a sense of health and well-being filling your lungs and stomach, and then your whole body.



4. Once you have got used to the rhythm of your breathing, try to keep your attention on the physical experience of the in and out breath. If you find your mind wanders and / or you start to feel anxious, gently bring your attention back to your breathing. Carry on practicing your controlled breathing for the desired amount of time.



This exercise is great to use on the go in stressful or anxious situations.

2. Mindfulness of breath exercise

Mindfulness of breath exercises are a great tool you can use in stressful situations and are great to help you pause and relax on your break at work. The below exercise is great to use on the go and at home.

1. Preparation

Sit or lie in a comfortable position. You may choose to close your eyes or keep them open, if you are feeling tired it may be useful to let just a little bit of light in to keep you alert.



2. Breathing

Begin by gently moving your attention onto the process of breathing. Notice the sensations of each breath as it happens, whether you focus on the rise and fall of your chest or abdomen, or on the feeling of the breath at the nostrils. Really feel what it is like to breathe, just observing it as it happens.



As you engage in this exercise you may find that your mind wanders, caught by thoughts or by noises in the room, or bodily sensations. When you notice that this happens, know that this is okay, and simply notice the distraction, but gently bring your attention back to the breath.

3. Ending the exercise

Take a few moments to yourself, connecting with your experience in the present moment. Expand your awareness from the breath into the space around you, and as you feel comfortable to do so, open your eyes to bring the exercise to a close.



4. Reflections

Take a few moments to think about what your experience was in this exercise, and how you feel in the present moment.



Take as long as you like to participate in this exercise it can be 2 minutes at work to help you de-stress and have a break, or an 10 minute wind down before bed.

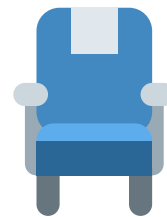
3. How to practice progressive muscle relaxation

Under stress, the muscles in our bodies tense. Muscular tension causes uncomfortable sensations such as a headache, stiff neck, painful shoulders, tight chest and difficulty breathing.

The most effective way to control bodily tension is to learn how to relax in response to tension. With practice, you will become better at noticing when your muscles are tense, and will be able to relax them "on-the-spot" without having to tense them first.

Muscle relaxation exercise:

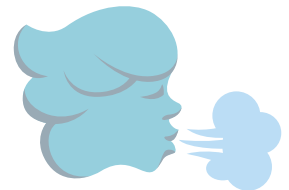
1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable and quiet surrounding.



2. Remove your shoes and loosen tight clothing.



3. Start by taking a couple of deep breaths. Allow yourself to be still for a few minutes, and let yourself start to unwind.



4. Focus on your breathing and let your muscles slowly start to relax.

5. Focus your attention on your right foot and arms. Tense your muscles in this area, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Notice what it feels like when these muscles are tight and tense. Tense for about 5 seconds.

6. Then relax the muscles in your right foot and leg, let them become floppy and limp.



7. Notice the different sensations in your muscles from the tense state to the relaxed state.

8. Focus on the feelings of relaxation in your hands and arms for at least 20 to 30 seconds.

9. Then begin to move to the other muscle groups. The usual progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence starts with focusing on your feet then your legs, hips, buttocks, stomach, chest, back, arms, neck, shoulders & finally face.



4. Relaxation diary

On the following page is a relaxation diary to help you to discover where and when you are best able to relax. It will also help you monitor your progress in relaxing and reducing stress. You can use the following tools to monitor your progress on any of the exercises in this pack.

Before doing the relaxation exercise, rate how relaxed you are feeling according to the scale given below. After completing the exercise, rate your level of relaxation again. You should also make notes about how you got on with the exercise. You can look at these notes to try and make your practice more effective.

Before:



Not relaxed (tense)

Moderately relaxed

Very relaxed (no tension)

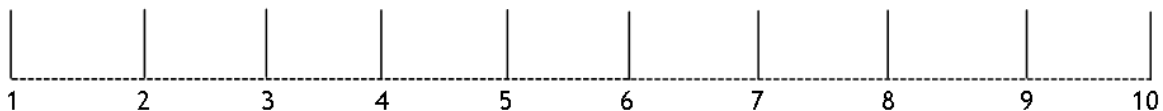


After:

Not relaxed (tense)

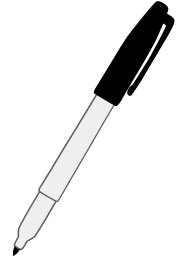
Moderately relaxed

Very relaxed (no tension)



4. Relaxation diary

Use this relaxation diary to help you to discover where and when you are best able to relax. It will also help you monitor your progress.



Time and place	Relaxation level before exercise	Relaxation level after exercise	Comments

5. Guided imagery for stress relief

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that can help relieve stress. When used as a relaxation technique, guided imagery involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace and free to let go of all tension and anxiety.

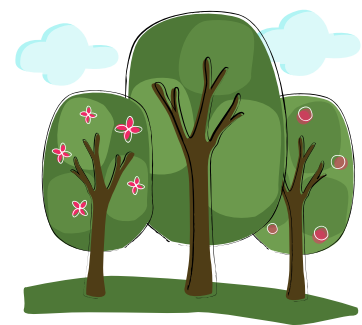
Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether a tropical beach, a favourite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own, with a therapist's help, or using an audio recording.

Guided imagery exercise:

1. Close your eyes and try to let your worries drift away.
2. Imagine your restful place.
3. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel.
4. Guided imagery works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible.

For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- See the sun setting over the water
- Hear the birds singing
- Smell the pine trees
- Feel the cool water on your bare feet
- Taste the fresh, clean air



6. Massage therapy for stress relief

Getting a massage provides deep relaxation, and as the muscles in your body relaxes, so does your overstressed mind. You don't have to visit the spa to enjoy the benefits of massage. There are many simple self- massage techniques you can use to relax and release stress.

Below are a few simple self-massage techniques you can try.

Self-massage techniques:



Scalp soother

Place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.



Easy on the eyes

Close your eyes and place your ring fingers directly under your eyebrows, near the bridge of your nose. Slowly increase the pressure for 5-10 seconds, then gently release. Repeat 2-3 times.



Sinus pressure relief

Place your fingertips at the bridge of your nose. Slowly slide your fingers down your nose and across the top of your cheekbones to the outside of your eyes.



Shoulder Tension Relief

Reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

7. Controlled worry periods exercise

When it comes to worrying trying to “just stop thinking about it” does not work for most, and can in fact make worrying worse. One way to combat the negative effects of worry suppression is to introduce controlled worry periods. The idea is to learn to postpone your worry. This will give you a greater sense of control and help worry become less intrusive in your life.

Here’s what to do:

1. Pick a worry period. This is a set time, place and length of time to do all your worrying. Try to keep your worry period the same everyday (e.g. 6.00 p.m in the dining room for 15 minutes). Preferably this will not be the hour or two before your bedtime.



2. When you notice yourself worrying about something during the day, list your worries briefly (in a couple of words only).



3. Make the decision not to worry about it then and there, but save the worry for your set worry period. Bring your attention back to the present and what it was you were doing, reassuring yourself that you will deal with your worries later. When the time arrives, allow yourself to worry for 15 minutes. Only spend the time worrying if you still feel it is necessary to worry.



Postponing your worries is different to trying to suppress your worries. When you postpone a worry, you are not telling your mind to stop worrying. Instead, you are asking your mind to move the worry aside for a little while so you can focus on other things. However, you will allow your mind to come back to the worry later.

It may seem like an effort to carry a notepad around to jot down your worries & reflect on the day’s worries at a set time every day (you can always use your phone). Indeed, typically people predict that they won’t be able to postpone their worrying. However people are often surprised that they are actually able to postpone their worries & experience a sense of control.

This can be very useful for dealing with stress and worry related to a large workload or high demand in the work place.

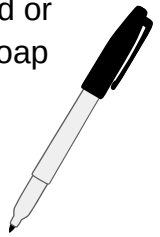


8. Are you getting enough time for yourself?

Time can be a precious commodity. Think about how you would spend your time if you had it just for yourself. Allocating more time to yourself will help you lead a more balanced life between the expectations of others and your own needs.

Finding time for yourself is not a selfish act, because if you are more relaxed and less stressed then you will be more efficient in your tasks. If you are less stressed at work then you will be able to focus on your job and be able to achieve more in less time.

As you go through the week, make a note in the box below of what makes you feel good or settled, for example, routine coffee with a friend or colleague, watching your favourite soap on tv, or mealtimes at home. Are these things which you could try to do more often?



What activities make you feel good?



-
-
-
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9. Time management for activities to make you feel good

Now you have identified the activities that make you feel good (page 41). You can work them into your time management.

Schedule an appropriate amount of time for them into your diary. This will help create a balance between what you know needs to be done and what you would like to do in order to make life more pleasant.



If I had ten minutes for myself I would...

If I had half an hour to myself I would...

If I had an hour to myself I would...

If I had half an day to myself I would...

10. Sitting relaxation exercise



1. Sit in a chair with your spine straight and your back supported. Let your legs extend outward from the chair, with your feet flat on the floor.
2. Do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body.
3. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation. Focus on the sensations of your hips and thighs sitting on the chair. Notice the solidity of the chair, and the surface that supports your weight.
4. Feel the soles of your feet, noticing the whole surface where they are in contact with the floor. Give yourself permission to give in to gravity and let the chair and floor support your weight. Take a few slow, deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Focus on the feeling of the breath, the movement of your chest, rib cage, shoulders, and the expansion of your lungs.
5. Now imagine that you are breathing through the soles of your feet. As you take breath, imagine that you are bringing warm, healing energy to every cell of your body. As you breathe out, imagine you are cleansing your body of tension, pain, and old, left over emotions.
6. As you breathe in, imagine filling your feet up with this positive, relaxing energy. Notice the warm, pleasant sensations moving into your toes, the balls of your feet, your arches, heels, insteps, and all through your feet. Give yourself the time you need to allow this to happen. Continue to focus on your feet until they feel completely relaxed and comfortable.

11. Rapid relaxation exercises

Here are a few exercises you can do in a minute or two to feel more relaxed. As you start, take a moment to do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.



1. Abdominal Breathing

Abdominal breathing is the one of the most effective ways to relax quickly. By breathing with your diaphragm you will immediately signal your autonomic nervous system to relax.

Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take some slow, deep breaths into the belly. It's helpful, but not essential, to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you are doing abdominal breathing correctly, the lower hand should move as much or more than the hand on your chest. Continue this slow, deep breathing for a couple of minutes, imagining the breath calming your body and clearing your mind. Notice how you feel.



2. Cook's Hookup

With legs extended, cross your left ankle over your right one. With your arms outstretched, cross your right wrist over your left one, then turn your hands so the palms are touching, clasp your fingers, and twist your hands down and toward your ribs, and rest them on your chest.

Hold this once you have learned the technique, you don't need to use the hands if you prefer not to. Stay in position for two minutes as you breathe through your nose. On the in-breath, push your tongue against your upper palette and on the out-breath push it against your lower palette. When the two minute period has elapsed, take a minute to notice what you experience in your body.

11. Rapid relaxation exercises



3. Quick Tensing and Relaxing

Tense your feet, lower legs, thighs, buttocks, pelvic muscles, abdomen, and lower back muscles. Hold them tightly for a few moments and notice the tension.

Then release the tension completely and let all those muscles soften and become supple and relaxed. Tense your hands, forearms, upper arms and shoulders, belly, midriff, middle and upper back, and facial muscles, and take a breath in so your rib cage is full extended.

Notice how that feels, then release the breath and soften all those muscles, letting them become supple and relaxed. As you continue to breathe, focus on releasing, softening, and letting go. Let the tension continue to flow out with every out-breath.



4. Creating a Symbol of Relaxation

When you are practicing relaxation, choose an image that conveys peace, comfort, or mental and physical letting go. This image can be anything you choose.

You may think of the seashore, or a favourite spot in nature. It may be an image like the sun, a rope untwisting, ice melting, or a soothing colour. It may be the face of a pet or of someone you love. Every time you do relaxation, call up that image as you are becoming relaxed. Allow the symbol to grow and fill your awareness.

Let all of the qualities of that symbol come to mind, and imagine them moving through your body on the rhythm of your breath. As you practice this more, you will be able to close your eyes anywhere and relax quickly by calling up your symbol and filling your awareness with it for a few minutes.

