



connect

wellbeing, ability, recovery

STRESS REDUCTION

Stress happens when the pressure and challenges of our lives exceed our ability to cope. Stress can have a damaging effect on our bodies, our emotions and on how we think. The following exercises address the physical effects.

Breathing

Breathing is a necessity of life that most people take for granted. With each breath of air, you obtain oxygen and release the waste product carbon dioxide. The more oxygen we have in our system, the more energy we produce. When we breathe down into our abdomen we massage all of the organs and encourage proper function of the liver, spleen, gallbladder, pancreas, and our entire digestive system.

The first step is to increase awareness of your breathing habits and to learn how to use breathing as a relaxation skill:

- Close your eyes
- Put your right hand on your stomach, just at the waistline
- Put your left hand on your chest in the centre
- Without trying to change your breathing, simply notice how you are breathing
- Which hand rises the most when you breathe in – the hand on your chest or the hand on your stomach?
- If your stomach expands, you are breathing from your abdomen or diaphragm.
- If your stomach doesn't move or moves less than your chest, you are breathing from your chest. The trick to shifting from chest to abdominal breathing is to make one or two full exhalations (breaths out) that push the air from the bottom of your lungs. This will create a vacuum that will pull in a deep, diaphragmatic breath on your next inhalation.

Body Scanning

The following exercise promotes body awareness and will help you identify areas of tension:

- Close your eyes
- Starting with your toes and moving up your body, ask yourself 'Where am I tense?'
- Whenever you discover a tense area, exaggerate it slightly so you can become aware of it
- Be aware of the muscles in your body that are tense
- Then say to yourself e.g., 'I am tensing my neck muscles... I am hurting myself...I am creating tension in my body.'
- Then relax that area
- Note that all muscular tension is self-produced

Source:

The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (2000), Martha Davis et al (New Harbinger Publications)



Letting Go of Thoughts

In this exercise, the aim is to passively observe the flow of your thoughts and feelings, without being concerned with their meaning. This will allow you to see what's on your mind and then let it go.

- Choose a comfortable sitting posture
- Take several deep breaths
- Close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting at the bottom of a deep pool of water
- When you have a thought, or feeling, see it as a bubble and let it rise away from you and disappear
- When it's gone, wait for the next one to appear and repeat the process
- Don't think about the content of the bubble – just observe it
- Sometimes the same bubble may come up many times, or several bubbles will seem related to each other, or the bubbles may be empty – that's okay – just watch them pass in front of your mind's eye.

If you feel uncomfortable imagining being underwater, imagine you are sitting on the bank of a river, watching a leaf drift slowly downstream. Observe one thought or feeling, and then let it drift out of sight on the leaf. Return to gazing at the river, waiting for the next leaf to float by.

Thinking and Stress

Sometimes what we say to ourselves can partially determine our mood and feelings. If we talk harshly to ourselves, we increase our own stress. Self-talk is usually so automatic that we don't notice it, or the effect it has on your moods and feelings. What is important is that you can learn to slow down and take note of your negative self-talk....then you can begin to change it with counter statements.

See the table on the next page. Which of the following sound like you? Can you imagine yourself thinking the stress-reduced way?



Source: The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (2000), Martha Davis et al (New Harbinger Publications)

Thinking Style	Stressful Thinking	Stress Reduced Thinking
Should/Must Thinking	<p>"I should be able to do this right"</p> <p>"I must not make mistakes"</p>	<p>"I will do the best I can"</p> <p>"It's ok to make mistakes sometimes"</p>
All-or-nothing Thinking	<p>"This is all wrong"</p> <p>"I just can't do it at all"</p>	<p>"This is not all wrong. There are some parts of it that are ok and some that need attention."</p> <p>"If I break this down into small steps I can do it"</p>
Over Generalisation	<p>"I always mess things up"</p> <p>"I'll never be able to do this"</p>	<p>"It's not true I always mess up"</p> <p>"If I take small steps and keep trying, over time I'll accomplish what I set out to do"</p>
Fortune Telling	<p>"I know this evening is going to be a disaster"</p>	<p>"I don't expect to enjoy this evening, but I'll give it a chance".</p>





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