
INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Distraction strategies – relaxing your mind

The experience of physical illness may leave us feeling as though we have little control over our lives. For many there will be ongoing uncertainty about what the future holds.

In this situation, it is common for worrying thoughts to go through your mind. Worrying thoughts can make you feel generally tense and anxious and result in the physical symptoms associated with the “fight or flight” response. Symptoms can include anything from a general feeling of unease to palpitations, shortness of breath, chest tightness, sweating, muscle tension, churning stomach, an urge to urinate, faintness and dizziness.

Since you can have only one thought at a time, distracting yourself from your worries may help to calm you down. Some people also find they are less aware of physical symptoms such as pain, nausea and fatigue when they are concentrating on something else. Distraction can also be useful when having unpleasant tests or treatment.

Distraction is a simple but potentially very powerful technique many of us already use.

For example, many of us will have used distraction to soothe a child who has fallen over, or to prevent a temper tantrum! This handout will describe different distraction techniques you might find useful.

- 1. Getting busy:** Physical activity makes us less likely to have worrying or negative thoughts. It also helps to reduce muscle tension. You could also be busy sorting out a messy drawer, peeling vegetables or sorting out some paperwork. You might choose to do arts and crafts, gardening or go online and trace your family history. You could go for a short walk, do stretches in your chair or practise relaxation exercises.
- 2. Exercise your mind:** Counting (eg counting tiles on a floor or counting backwards from 100 in threes), listing names of towns beginning with a certain letter, mentally going through a film you have seen, saying your favourite song or prayer in your head, holding each word for three seconds. You could put on some music, play a game on your mobile phone, surf the internet, read or do a crossword or Sudoku puzzle.

3. Remembering and imagining:

Remember an enjoyable holiday, place or event. Ask yourself if you can remember details - what could you see, smell, feel and hear? Imagining can also be useful. You could try thinking about how you would spend your money if you won the lottery, or which celebrity you would invite out to dinner.

4. Focus on the present:

Focus on your surroundings. What can you hear? What can you smell? What can you feel? Describe what you can see in great detail.

Remember: Not all the techniques will suit everyone or every situation. You will need to experiment to find what is best for you. If you practise these techniques regularly in your day, it will become more natural and may help you prevent stress levels rising.

You may need to plan ahead and rotate a number of different strategies if a prolonged period of distraction is required (eg undergoing a medical procedure). Simply knowing you can distract yourself for short periods of time can give you back a sense of control and help you get through the more difficult parts of your day.

Further sources of information

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. Stating a web address does not imply we endorse a particular site. Neither does not stating a web address imply lack of endorsement.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

The PALS team is available to help with any of your comments, compliments or concerns and will ensure a prompt and efficient service. Contact details:

- King's Mill Hospital **01623 672222**
(out of hours answer phone)
Email: Pals.kmh@sfh-tr.nhs.uk
- Newark Hospital **01636 685692**
(out of hours answer phone)
Email: Pals.nwk@sfh-tr.nhs.uk

If you need this information in a different language or format, please contact PALS, as above.

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