

# How to relieve stress and relax

## Information for patients



Quick and easy techniques may help you deal with stress, meaning you can be more relaxed overall. Not every technique will work for everyone so it's a good idea to try a few and see which works best for you. You may want to check with your doctor before using these techniques, especially if you have difficulties breathing. Specific exercises to help with breathlessness can be found at: <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/breathlessness/managing-and-treating-breathlessness>

# Relaxed breathing

Relaxed breathing is one of the best ways to lower stress in your body. When you breathe deeply in a relaxed way, it sends messages to your brain telling your body to calm down and relax. Relaxed breathing can also prevent stress from building up in the first place. It is quick and easy to do, and you can do it anywhere.

## To learn relaxed breathing:

1. Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach just below your ribs.
2. Count '1000, 2000, 3000 in' as you breathe in through your nose. As you gently breathe in through your nose, allow your stomach to rise. Your chest will stay fairly still. Keep the movement gentle.
3. Hold your breath for a second or two if you can, and then count '1000, 2000, 3000, 4000 out', as you breathe out through your mouth slowly and evenly. Feel your stomach sinking. As you breathe out, say a word or phrase to yourself which helps you to relax, for example 'Relax' or 'Let it go'.
4. Breathe at a pace which feels natural for you. Again, be aware of your hand on your stomach rising, while the hand on your upper chest hardly moves.
5. Once you have mastered the technique of relaxed breathing, you can continue without placing your hands on your chest and stomach.

Relaxation is a skill that needs to be learned, just like learning to play a musical instrument, so it is helpful to practise this regularly at first. It is helpful to use relaxed breathing before you are aware of being stressed, as this can help to prevent the build-up of stress. Two or three breaths every hour or so each day is ideal. Building this into your everyday routine (e.g., every time you have a drink, go to the toilet, or the adverts come on TV) can help you remember to do relaxed breathing.

# Mental imagery and visualization

Our brains are very powerful tools in relaxation. They work very hard to keep us safe and are often on the lookout for threats and danger, even when there isn't any. They also tell our bodies when it is safe to relax. Research has shown that thinking about relaxing images can help to reduce stress and anxiety. Here is an example of how you might use calming mental imagery:

1. Close your eyes, breathe slowly, and feel yourself relax.
2. Imagine a ball of healing energy, perhaps a white light forming somewhere in your body.

3. When you see the ball of energy, slowly breathe in, and guide the ball to any part of the body where you feel pain, tension, discomfort, or even nausea.
4. Let the ball of energy rest in one spot. Continue to take rhythmic breaths. After a few moments, move the ball to another spot in your body where you feel discomfort. Continue to take rhythmic breaths.
5. Now picture the ball moving away from your body, taking with it any painful or uncomfortable feelings. You may see the ball getting smaller and smaller in the distance as it disappears along with your tension and discomfort.

Sometimes people like to use visualisation in a way that helps them to feel positive during their cancer treatment. This might mean visualising someone who is supportive and caring being present during treatment or imagining a place that makes you feel calm or happy. Other people like to repeat meaningful phrases that help to calm them or make them feel strong. Visualisation can look very different for people so it can be helpful to try different techniques to find something that works for you.

## **Muscle tension and release**

When we feel stressed, our muscles can tense up without us realising. This is a normal response to stress and is not harmful, but it can lead to temporary discomfort or pain, including tension headaches. Most people find it difficult to relax or have forgotten how it feels to be fully relaxed. Relaxation is a skill which requires practice. Practising stretching and relaxing our muscles can be very useful. It helps us to notice when we are beginning to tense up (get stressed) and teaches us how to do something about it (relax our muscles).

1. Sit/lie down in a quiet room.
2. Take several slow, deep breaths.
3. As you breathe in, tense a particular muscle or group of muscles. For example, clench your teeth or stiffen your arms or legs. You do not need to tense your muscles as hard as you can. Just tense them around three-quarters tight.
4. Keep your muscles tense for three seconds while holding your breath.
5. Then breathe out, release the tension, and let your body relax completely for about 20 seconds.
6. Repeat the process with another muscle or muscle group.

A variation of this technique is called progressive muscle relaxation. You work your way up your body starting with the toes of one foot. Progressively tense and relax all the muscles of one leg.

Next, do the same with the other leg. Work your way up your body, tensing and relaxing each of the muscle groups in your body, including those in your neck and face. Remember to hold your breath while briefly tensing your muscles and to breathe out when releasing the tension.

Relaxation exercises should not hurt. If you find any of the tensing movements uncomfortable, simply leave that part of the exercise out and concentrate on relaxing that area of your body.

## Distraction strategies

It's common for people with cancer to experience worrying thoughts which can lead you to feel tense or anxious. Since you can only concentrate on one thought at a time, distracting yourself from your worries may help calm you down for a short period of time and can also be useful when having unpleasant tests or treatment. Here are some simple strategies you could try when you notice yourself having worrying thoughts:

- **Getting busy.** Physical activity makes us less likely to have worrying thoughts. You could do something as simple as sorting out paperwork or sorting a messy drawer. If you are physically able to you could go for a short walk.
- **Exercise your mind.** Counting, listing names of towns with a certain letter, mentally going through films you have seen. You could also put on some music or do a puzzle like Sudoku or a crossword.

## Coping with worries

Lots of people who have been recently diagnosed with cancer deal with worrying thoughts. In everyday life, many of us tend to amplify our thoughts to the point of them being facts. This can worsen with a cancer diagnosis and lead people to fall into thought traps which are not always logical and can impact our feelings towards ourselves. Examples of thought traps are:

- **Jumping to conclusions.** This involves making assumptions about the future, for example thinking your family won't be able to cope if anything happened to you. You might also try to mind-read what others are thinking (based upon their actions) to manage feelings of uncertainty. For example, you might infer that any results are bad by a look from your nurse or consultant.
- **All or nothing thinking.** Viewing situations or events as either black or white. For example, if you find eating difficult you might think that you either eat a meal out with your family or friends, or don't bother going. Whereas you could still enjoy socialising with just a soft drink while they eat.

- **Mind-reading.** This trap happens when we believe that we know what others are thinking and we assume that they are thinking the worst of us. The problem is that no one can read minds, so we don't really know what others are thinking.

Some examples include: "Others think I'm stupid." / "They are avoiding me because of my cancer."

- **Over-generalisation.** This is when we use words like always or never to describe situations or events. This type of thinking is not helpful because it does not take all situations or events into account. For example: "I always make mistakes" / "I will never feel better again". Sometimes we make mistakes, but we don't always make mistakes.
- **Labelling.** Sometimes we talk to ourselves in mean ways and use a single negative word to describe ourselves. This kind of thinking is unhelpful and unfair. We are too complex to be summed up in a single word, such as "I'm stupid." / "I'm not worthy."
- **Filtering.** You might select only parts of information which match your current beliefs or mood. For example, you might focus on information about how painful the treatment could be and pay less attention to the success rates.
- **Catastrophising.** Assuming the worst outcome will happen and that it is out of your control. This pattern of thinking often includes thoughts of "What if?" e.g., "What if I only have days to live or don't wake up tomorrow?".
- **The 'shoulds', 'woulds' and 'coulds':** This might include thoughts of "I should have done more in my life before this" / "I would have been able to look after my family if I didn't have this diagnosis".

## What can we do if we notice we are falling into thought traps?

- **Learning to step back from thoughts.** You can become hooked on these thoughts when they come up and believe they are true; you may feel stuck with these thoughts. One technique to manage this way of thinking is learning to unhook from your thoughts. The aim is not to get rid or change these thoughts but notice them and be able to stand back from them before acting.
- **Practising unhooking.** You can practise unhooking from your thoughts in several different ways. Try practising each of the techniques below for 30 seconds each and see if your thought seems less powerful than it did when you began:
  - **External voice.** Instead of saying "I'm going to fail," say, "I'm having the thought that I'm going to fail", thereby creating some space between you and the thought.

- **Name the story.** If all these thoughts and feelings were put into a movie titled 'The Something Story', what would you call it? For example, 'The I'm Going to Fail Story' or 'The No-one Likes Me Story'. Every time thoughts or feelings come up that are linked to this story, notice this and say to yourself "Aha, here it is again, the I'm Going to Fail Story."
- **Say it slowly.** Say the thought in slow motion. What do you notice about the power of the thought now? Is it as painful or uncomfortable as it was before you practiced this strategy?
- **Leaves on a stream.** When the thought pops up, imagine placing it on a leaf in a gentle stream and watching as it approaches, floats past and then eventually disappears.
- **Thanking your mind.** Next time an unhelpful thought pops into your head, try saying "Thanks for that brain." After all, your brain thinks it's helping.

## Building self-compassion during difficult times

Compassion doesn't only mean being caring towards others but also to yourself. Many people forget to be compassionate with themselves, so it is important to remind ourselves. We know that people who are compassionate towards themselves and their feelings can handle setbacks more easily than those who frequently criticise themselves.

Below are some exercises that may help you to become more compassionate towards yourself:

- **Building your inner compassionate self.** Take note of how you speak to yourself when things seem to go wrong. What words are you using when you are being critical? What is the tone of your voice like to yourself? Does the inner voice remind you of somebody in your life who was critical of you?

When you begin to be conscious of your inner critic, start to form a compassionate part of yourself. One way to do this can be to think what a kind relative or friend might say.

Think about the qualities that the image has. Are they caring? Old? Young? Male? Female? Maybe you think about a pet or imaginary character as kind and caring? Will the image have similar experiences to yourself? What would your compassionate self-look like? How would they sound? How would the image relate to you, and how would you relate to them?

Now, use this image to help change the statements voiced by your inner critic. For example, statements such as “I am not attractive anymore” can be transformed using compassionate self-talk e.g. “I may look different now, but I am still loveable”.

How would you treat a friend? Think about a close friend who feels bad about themselves or holds a negative view of themselves. What advice would you give them? Note down what you might typically say or do in this situation.

Now, think about the times when you feel bad about yourself. How do you typically respond to yourself? Note down what you might typically say or do in this situation.

Did you notice a difference? If so, think about how things might change if you responded to yourself like you would to your close friend.

- **Self-compassion journal.** Keeping a journal is a helpful way to express your emotions. Note down anything that you have felt bad about (e.g., feeling unattractive, argument with a relative etc.), what you said to yourself and how it made you feel at that time. While writing your journal, try and be accepting and non-judgemental of your experience.
- **Words of compassion.** It can also be reassuring to know that everybody has painful experiences at times. Acknowledging this and using words of kindness to care for yourself can help you to feel more positive and supported e.g., tell yourself “It is okay to feel like this” or “I am going through a difficult time right now”.

## Additional resources

For more tools to cope with your diagnosis, please visit the Sherwood Forest Hospitals Clinical Psychology Cancer Service website at:

<https://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk/services/cancer-psychology-service/>

## Further sources of information

NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk/conditions](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions)

Our website: [www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk)

## Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

**King's Mill Hospital:** 01623 672222

**Newark Hospital:** 01636 685692

**Email:** [sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net](mailto:sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net)

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email [sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net](mailto:sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net).

**If you would like more support, please visit the Clinical Psychology Cancer Service website:** <https://www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk/services/cancer-psychology-service/>

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