

STRESS AND ANXIETY REDUCTION STRATEGIES



STRESS MANAGEMENT

- Stress management teaches you about:
 - Managing stress and anxiety symptoms;
 - A slow breathing exercise to decrease your stress and anxiety; and,
 - Relaxation and physical activity.

If you answered 'YES' to one or more of the boxes below, you may find 'STRESS MANAGEMENT' helpful.

For more than two weeks have you:

1. Been unable to relax most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> YES
2. Felt stressed and overwhelmed most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> YES
3. Felt panicky and anxious most of the time?	<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> YES

STRESS REDUCTION STRATEGIES

- Stress is common in daily life and may be associated with work, family or personal relationships.
- Whatever the cause, there are some simple steps which can help to reduce stress.

Postpone major life changes: Avoid moving house or changing jobs during stressful periods. These major life changes are stressful enough alone.

Resolve personal conflicts: Stress in personal relationships is one of the most common causes of chronic depression.

Engage in an enjoyable and distracting activity: For example, meditation, reading, gardening, listening to music or going to the movies.

Work and leisure:

- Avoid working long hours and taking on additional responsibilities.
- Learn to say "No" more often. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by new commitments.
- Make sure you have adequate time to rest, relax and exercise.
- Part of learning to relax requires that you set aside some time in the day to do the things you enjoy.

Regular gentle exercise:

- Exercise, such as walking, swimming, yoga, dancing, golf, or going to the gym can help relieve muscle tension as well as mental tension.
- Try to do some type of exercise every day, even if it is as simple as walking around the block.

Getting additional help: Practical help and support gives relief while you are unwell.

SLOW BREATHING EXERCISE

Have you noticed that you are breathing too fast? (A relaxed breathing rate is usually 10 to 12 breaths per minute).

- It is helpful to practice this exercise three to four times per day (ie. before breakfast, lunch, dinner, and bedtime) so that it becomes easy to use as a short-term coping strategy during the times you feel anxious.
- Use the slow breathing exercise at any other time of the day that you feel anxious.
 - Time the number of breaths you take in one minute (breathing in then out is counted as one breath).
 - Hold your breath and count to five (do not take a deep breath). When you get to five, breathe out and say the word "relax" to yourself in a calm, soothing manner.
 - Start breathing in (through your nose) and out slowly in a six second cycle. Breathe in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. In the beginning it can be helpful to time your breathing using the second hand of a watch or clock.
 - Count to yourself: "In two three, relax two three".
 - Continue breathing in a six second cycle for at least five minutes or until the symptoms of overbreathing have settled.
 - After you have practiced this exercise, time the number of breaths you take in one minute.

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LEARNING TO RELAX

When you are feeling anxious, your muscles become tense. When your muscles remain tense for long periods of time, you can start to develop aches and pains, fatigue, headaches and difficulty breathing.

MUSCLE TENSION EXERCISE

Take a few minutes to carry out this exercise which will show you how muscle tension can cause pain and fatigue.

1. Hold a piece of paper in your hand and stretch your arm out in front of you.
2. Keep holding the paper for a few minutes without moving your arm.

You will probably notice that your arm feels tired after only a few minutes, and may even start to ache in some places. Imagine how your arm would feel if you continued to hold that piece of paper for a number of hours. Although the paper is not heavy, keeping your muscles tense for any length of time can cause pain.

MUSCLE RELAXATION EXERCISE

This exercise helps to reduce physical and mental tension. Practice this exercise regularly and at the first signs of muscle tension. A full session of relaxation takes about 15 to 20 minutes.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room.
2. Put your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands in your lap.
3. CLOSE YOUR EYES.
4. Do the SLOW BREATHING EXERCISE for three minutes.
5. After three minutes of slow breathing, start the muscle relaxation exercise: tense each of your muscle groups for 10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds, in the following order:
 - Hands - clench your hands into fists, then relax;
 - Lower arms - bend your hands up at the wrists, then relax;
 - Upper arms - bend your arms up at the elbow, then relax;
 - Shoulders - lift your shoulders up, then relax;
 - Neck - stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then relax;
 - Forehead and scalp - raise your eyebrows, then relax;
 - Eyes - close your eyes tightly, then relax;
 - Jaw - clench your teeth, then relax;
 - Chest - breathe in deeply, then breathe out and relax;
 - Stomach - pull your tummy in, then relax;
 - Upper back - pull your shoulders forward, then relax;
 - Lower back - while sitting, roll your back into a smooth arc, then relax;
 - Buttocks - tighten your buttocks, then relax;
 - Thighs - push your feet firmly into the floor, then relax;
 - Calves - lift your toes off the ground, then relax; and,
 - Feet - gently curl your toes down, then relax.
6. Continue slow breathing for five more minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation.
7. As you become better at relaxation, it can be more interesting to combine these exercises with memories of relaxing situations (eg. lying on a beach, doing a favourite activity).

Once you are good at relaxing your muscles, start relaxing tense parts of your body during the day while you are going about your daily activities.

MORE INFORMATION

Learn about other coping strategies for depression and anxiety:

[beyondblue fact sheet - Sleep-wake cycle management](#)

[beyondblue fact sheet - Physical activity management](#)

[beyondblue fact sheet - Reducing alcohol and other drugs](#)

Learn about other treatments for depression and anxiety:

[beyondblue fact sheet - Cognitive and other psychological therapies](#)

[beyondblue fact sheet - Why do I need to take antidepressant drugs?](#)

[beyondblue fact sheet - Alternative treatments](#)