



FamilyLifeConnect

Relaxation techniques to help reduce stress and worry

We all experience stress sometimes; it's a normal part of life. When you are stressed you may experience:

- shortness of breath
- increased heart rate
- pounding in your head and ears
- sweating
- increased muscle tension
- inability to concentrate
- tingling or pins and needles on your skin
- a dry mouth
- a feeling that the walls and ceiling are closing in on you.

You may also find it difficult to think or do anything when you are feeling this way.

There are many things that you can try to reduce your sense of stress. Not all of them may work for you, but it is important to find some ways to cope when you are feeling overwhelmed.

Find some relaxation techniques that work for you and practise them regularly. Try to include some relaxation in your weekly planner. Even when you start to feel better, these techniques can help you to stay well and cope better with day-to-day life.

Relaxation exercises to try

- **Practise slow, deep breathing.** Try slowly breathing in for three counts, filling your lungs with air, holding your breath for three counts and then gently letting a full breath out. You may want to close your eyes while doing this to really focus on the sensation of your breathing. The slower you

can breathe in and out, the better. Repeat as many times as you need to. Gradually, as your breathing slows down and your physical symptoms subside, you should feel calmer and less panicked.

- **Mindfulness.** Once you feel your heart rate and breathing start to slow, you could try some mindfulness techniques. The concept of mindfulness is simple and practical, and it can be done anywhere. It is about being present in the moment just in the here and now. Sometimes our minds can fill with thoughts, worries, fear and memories – both good and bad. Being 'mindful' doesn't require you to judge these thoughts and feelings, push them away or challenge them. Instead, you let these thoughts exist in your mind, floating around in the background, but then refocus your mind on the sensations you are experiencing in the present moment.

Slow, deep breathing can help move you into mindfulness. As your mind fills with thoughts, acknowledge them but then refocus on your slow, deep breaths, counting them in and out if necessary. Continue to bring yourself back to the present moment each time you find your mind wandering.

Notice the sensations around you. As well as breathing, it can help to notice what you can see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Practise this technique when you are walking, eating, driving, trying to get to sleep, waiting in a queue etc. – really notice the sensations around you while you are doing these things. For guided mindfulness meditation visit the Smiling Mind website: smilingmind.com.au

- **Visualisation.** Try to focus your thinking on something relaxing or that you find pleasant. Close your eyes and think of a time in your life, or a place you have been to or imagined, or perhaps even a person that you love, that makes you feel calm and happy. Each time your mind wanders, refocus on this calm and happy place, experience or person.
- **Muscle relaxation.** Focus your mind on different muscle groups in your body. Start from the tips of your toes or the top of your head and slowly work your way up or down each muscle group, tensing the related muscles, then relaxing them and taking note of the change in tension after each.

You could practise this technique lying down and in a quiet place. Start with concentrating on your toes – scrunch them up tightly and hold for three counts then release for three counts. Stretch your feet out and hold for a count of three, then relax. Notice the tension when your feet are rigid and compare this with how they feel when you ease the tension. Continue this technique from your feet to your shins, back of your shins, thigh, and back of thighs, until you reach your head.

Distraction. Try to replace the worry or stressful thought(s) you are having with another thought.

For example, if you are feeling panicked, distract yourself by noticing your environment – what are the people around you wearing, what is the texture

and colour of the floor etc.? You could also distract your mind by counting backwards from 100 or saying the alphabet backwards. If this works for you, it's good to have a few ideas about what you will replace or distract your worries with when you are feeling anxious.

- **Guided relaxation.** There are many relaxation recordings available to help you practise guided relaxation. Many can be downloaded as apps to your smartphone. They include calming sounds like crackling fire and waves breaking on the shore, to a more guided type of meditation. *beyondblue* also has some you might like to try: beyondblue.org.au/relaxation
- **Changing your environment or creating a calm environment.** If possible, remove yourself from a situation that is making you stressed. Do something that usually relaxes you such as having a bath, lighting some calming candles, reading a book, watching a funny movie or TV series, having a cup of tea, calling a caring friend or doing some physical exercise – even if it's just a walk around the block.

Remember that practising all or some of these relaxation techniques will help put you back in control of your stress and anxious feelings so they do not overwhelm you.



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The **FamilyLifeConnect** service is funded by the South Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network.

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FamilyLifeConnect

FamilyLifeConnect is a free service that puts people living in the Greater Dandenong community in touch with mentors. They can support your wellbeing and help you achieve your goals.

 **1800 326 543**

 **connect@familylife.com.au**

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