

STRESS MANAGEMENT TIPS

Use this worksheet to better manage your stress.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF STRESS AWARENESS

Long-term stress can contribute to both physical and mental illness through effects on the heart, immune and metabolic functions, and hormones acting on the brain. Additionally, attention, memory and the way we deal with emotions are negatively impacted. This dysregulation can negatively affect our overall well-being.

COPING SKILLS

Coping skills are the ways in which we respond to address stress and can be negative or positive.

Negative Coping Skills

- Smoking
- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Negative self-talk (or to others)
- Overeating/Undereating
- Risky behavior
- Acting on violence or aggression
- Avoiding others

Positive Coping Skills

- Listening to music
- Spending virtual time with others
- Exercising
- Positive self-talk (or to others)
- Engaging in hobbies/activities
- Meditation
- Mindfulness
- Breathing exercise

Below we will examine the three stress combating skills with the most success.

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the ability to be aware of your thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, and actions – in the present moment – without judging or criticizing yourself or your experience. Mindfulness can help you make healthy choices about your life based on both your rational thoughts and your emotions. Breathing exercises will help ground your experience and clear the mind for you to be able to focus on your singular experience, separate from your surrounding environment.

An exercise in mindfulness when dealing with negative self-talk:

Each time you think a negative thought, you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful and release the negativity.

BREATHING EXERCISES

Uneven breathing: Inhale for 2 counts and exhale for 4 counts, inhale for 3 counts and exhale for 6 counts, inhale for 4 counts and exhale for 8 counts, inhale for 5 counts and exhale for 10 counts. Repeat backwards starting at the 5-count inhale.

Square Breathing: Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, repeat.

Breath of Fire: Relax the jaw. Inhale and exhale rapidly, feel the belly expand and contract rapidly.

Alternate Nostril: **For right-handed individuals:** use the right thumb to close the right nostril, inhale through the left nostril. Use the right pinky to close the left nostril, exhale through the right nostril.

Repeat. **For left-handed individuals:** use the left thumb to close the left nostril, inhale through the right nostril. Use the left pinky to close the right nostril, exhale through the left nostril.

The Skull Shinning Breath: Relax the shoulders, the jaw and neck. Sharply inhale drawing the belly in and let the inhale react naturally as a rebound without any effort.

MEDITATION EXERCISES

Begin by selecting a meditation position. If you have a yoga mat, you may choose to lay down. On the floor, lay with the legs extended and the arms gently by your side with palms facing upwards. Relax the neck and jaw and keep your eyes closed or with a soft gaze if that is more comfortable.

If sitting, you may select a chair. On the chair, sit on the edge with a straight back. Drop the shoulders down (not forward), tilt the head slightly down as if a string aligns you from your sit bone to the crown of your head. Place your arms on your lap with your hands facing upwards. You may also choose to sit on the floor. If so, sit cross-legged with a straight back. Drop your shoulders down and imagine the same string leading from your sit bone to the crown of your head. Place your hands on your knees facing upwards. Keep your eyes closed or soften your gaze.

You may also elect to stand. Stand with feet shoulder width apart. Relax the neck and jaw. Drop down the shoulders and imagine a straight line from the heels of your feet to the crown of your head. Slightly tilt your head so your crown more directly faces upward. Keep your arms by your sides and close your eyes or soften your gaze.

Excerpts from *The Tao of Bipolar: Using Meditation & Mindfulness to Find Balance and Peace* by Simpkins & Simpkins.

Exercise 1 Open Attention to Body Experiences: Sit comfortably and turn your attention to your body. Begin by paying attention to your skin. Does it feel cool or warm, dry or damp? Do you have any sensations such as tingling, itching or pain in a particular body area? Notice mindfully without judging the sensation as good or bad; just notice it now. Move inward to your muscles. Scan through your body. Notice the sensations you feel there, perhaps a tight feeling or heaviness. Notice what you are experiencing but don't try to change anything. Then, moving inward, turn to your breathing. Notice the air as it travels through your nose, goes down into your lungs and then travels out again. Does the air feel warm or cool? Is your breathing soft or forced? Follow each breath in and out. Recognize that each breath is new. Now pay attention to your pulse. Although it might be difficult at first, be patient, and you might begin to feel the sensation. If not, place your fingers on your pulse at the inside of your wrist. Finally, allow your attention to move all around your body and notice any sensations that occur. Sit quietly for a few minutes with your attention focused on sensations.

Exercise 2 Become Aware of Thoughts: Sit quietly and close your eyes. Follow the flow of your thoughts. Notice what you are thinking about as you think it. You might find it helpful to say to yourself, 'now I'm thinking this, now I'm thinking that'. Be like someone who is sitting on the bank to a river watching leaves and twigs flow down the river. Don't jump into the river. Stay onshore, observing. So, don't let yourself get carried away by a stream of thought. If you do find yourself getting carried away, resume observing as soon as you notice this happening. Now observe beyond the content of thinking to the thought itself. Do you have many thoughts all at once? Or are your thoughts slow? Do you tend to think about a certain thing or person? Don't judge a thought as good or bad; just notice the different qualities of your thinking.

Exercise 3 Visualize Stillness for Clarity: Use peaceful visualization to slow down your mental chatter. Although we describe a scene in nature, feel free to use any peaceful place you prefer that is personally meaningful to you. Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Imagine sitting on the shore of a pond that is alive with activity: frogs croak; crickets sing; birds fly overhead; a fish jumps out of water, feeds on insects, splashes back in, and jumps out again in another spot after a bit. Wind whips over the water stirring up the muddy bottom. All is movement. Then gradually, as the day passes, the conditions begin to shift. The wind dies down. The frogs settle in for a nap, the crickets are silent, the birds perch in the trees, and the fish stops jumping and waits. The pond is quiet. The murky, rippled surface calms as the mud sinks, leaving the water crystal clear. All is stillness. Imagine this scene vividly. Stay with the quiet, clear water.