

TECHNIQUES FOR SLOWING DOWN RACING THOUGHTS AND COMPLETING THE STRESS CYCLE

Presented by the Office of Health Promotion



WHEN TO USE THIS BOOK

- As soon as you notice you're having **racing thoughts**, feeling **physical symptoms of anxiety** in your body, or you're having **trouble concentrating**, it can be helpful to try one of these techniques.
- It's also helpful to try these techniques when you're not feeling anxious. Try to practice some of them at regular intervals throughout the day.
- **Some techniques might work better for you than others.** There are many listed here not because you should do them all, but so that you have plenty of options to figure out what you like.
- Note: It's normal to experience stress or anxiety. These techniques aren't meant to eliminate them, but to provide space between you and those thoughts or feelings. Remember, the more we try ignore uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, the more intense they can become. **So, when you are feeling stressed or anxious, try pausing and be curious about the experience. And, try one of the techniques in this book to ground you.**

WHAT IS THE STRESS CYCLE?

Like all things in life, responses to stress have a beginning, middle, and end. This is what's called the **stress cycle**.

Biologically, we are trained to go through a stress cycle. We would see something dangerous, like a lion, and run from it. Then, we'd find safety and rest, completing the stress cycle.

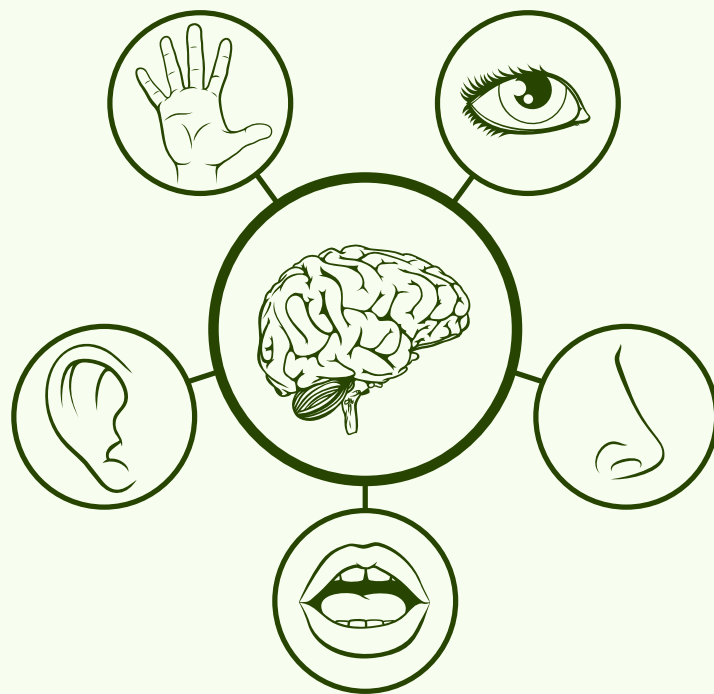
Too often these days, we get stuck in the stress cycle. Everyday instances that aren't life-threatening put us into the stress cycle and it's hard to calm our bodies down and complete the cycle. Learning how to complete this cycle and let the stress move through you is a helpful skill for responding to any stressful situation, intense emotion, or racing thought.

DIFFERENT WAYS TO QUIET YOUR MIND

- Focusing on your breathing and physical sensations
- Repeating a grounding phrase to yourself
- Journaling
- Distraction
- Physical activities
- Creating a bedtime routine

Look through the following sections to find specific activities and tips for each of these categories.

FOCUSING ON BREATHING AND PHYSICAL SENSATIONS



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MINDFULNESS

Describe in detail:

- 5** things you can **see**
- 4** things you can **hear**
- 3** things you can **feel**
- 2** things you can **smell**
- 1** thing you can **taste**



TAKE 5 BREATHING

1. Spread out your fingers
2. Use your other pointer finger to trace up and down each finger, starting at your thumb
3. Inhale as you trace up a finger, exhale as you trace down

BOX BREATHING

Visualize edges of a box.

Inhale for 4 counts

Hold for 4 counts

Exhale for 4 counts

Hold for 4 counts

Repeat.

BUBBLE BREATHING

1. Take a deep breath in and hold it for a moment
2. Breathe out slowly through the bubble wand, paying attention to the bubbles you're creating



GROUNDING MEDITATION

Close your eyes and place your hand on your chest or belly.

What **sensations** do you feel in your body?

Where do you feel **tension**? Where do you feel **relaxation**?

Try not to think too much about what you're feeling in your body. Instead, just **notice**.

TAKE A MINDFUL SHOWER

Get in the shower. Try to quiet your mind and focus **only** on your senses.



What does the warm water **feel** like?

What does the soap **smell** like?

What does the water flow **sound** like?

SMILE

Close your eyes and smile.

Notice how that feels.

REPEATING GROUNDING PHRASES



WHAT'S A GROUNDING PHRASE?

- A grounding phrase can help you to **redirect your mind** from your anxious thoughts to something that feels more helpful for you.
- Depending on what your racing thoughts tend to be, different phrases can be helpful.

HOW TO COME UP WITH A GROUNDING PHRASE FOR YOU:

- Explore your racing thoughts:
 - Do your racing thoughts tend to focus on past mistakes you've made or future problems you need to solve?
 - Are you avoiding an intense feeling by engaging in these racing thoughts?
- Make a phrase that addresses the underlying causes of your racing thoughts.

EXAMPLES OF GROUNDING PHRASES

- What's in the past is done
- It's okay to make mistakes
- It's okay to feel sad/mad
- This feeling will pass
- I will get through this
- I trust myself to take care of future problems

TIPS TO MAKE THIS MORE USEFUL

- Write your grounding phrase somewhere you'll see it throughout the day (like a post-it note next to your bed or on your phone screen saver).
- Repeat this phrase to yourself as often as you can.
- The more repetitions you get in, the more likely you are to remember to use this technique when you're stuck in a stressful moment.

JOURNALING



"AND THEN" JOURNALING

Often, we get stuck in thinking about worst case scenarios, without realizing that we will make it through whatever outcome occurs. Practicing "and then" journaling helps you **move through the worst case scenarios** you're focusing on to remember that worst case scenarios **rarely occur**, and if they do, **you will survive**.

1. Write down the racing thought in your head.
2. Play the game "and then," continuing through all the steps of the worst-case scenario you're worrying about until you reach an outcome you know you can manage.

WRITING SOMEONE A LETTER

If you're feeling upset with another person or you're replaying what you wish you would have said in a conversation with someone else, write them a letter saying all of this.

You don't need to ever send it; the purpose is to get these feelings out.

SELF-COMPASSION JOURNALING

- Write about something good that happened to you today
- Write about something you like about yourself
- Write about a time when you messed up or you were upset with yourself. Think through this moment, making sure to be kind to yourself and to give yourself grace. **Remember that it's okay to make mistakes and to not be perfect**

GRATITUDE JOURNALING

Write about things in your life that you are thankful for. Be specific!

If there's anyone in particular that comes to mind, consider writing them a thank-you note.

TWO-MINUTE MORNINGS

In the morning (or when you can remember), write down the following:

- 1 thing you will **let go of**
- 1 thing you are **thankful for** (be specific)
- 3 things you will **focus on** today

DISTRACTION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES



DISTRACTIONS

If you feel completely lost in anxiety and racing thoughts, distraction can be helpful to get out of that uneasy place.

Try some of the following activities:

- Coloring, knitting, or other crafting
 - Check out the Nook Activity each week for ideas and supplies.
- Listening to uplifting/happy music you like
- Reading or watching TV

Doing anything that makes you **laugh** can be especially helpful!

CREATE A SELF-CARE KIT TO USE IN MOMENTS OF STRESS

If you have a self-care kit ready, you'll have activities to distract yourself with that you don't even have to think about.

1

Find a box or bag. It could be a shoebox or a box from a package you received.

2

Decorate your box! Find your favorite pictures and quotes, and tape or glue them onto your box or bag.

3

Fill your box/bag with things that soothe you or make you smile! Here are some ideas for you to include:

- essential oils
- chocolate or other sweet treats
- herbal tea
- a book that makes you happy
- letters from friends or family
- a coloring book

- face masks
- scented lotion
- stress balls or other toys
- soft or textured things
- a list of songs, videos, or podcasts you like

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Use your box whenever you feel like you need a little pick-me-up!

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE MOMENT

Getting your body moving is proven to reduce stress. Going outside can also be helpful.

Try some of the following physical activities:

- Go for a walk, run, or bike ride outside
- Go to the Rec for a workout
- Do yoga
- Put on your favorite music and dance to it

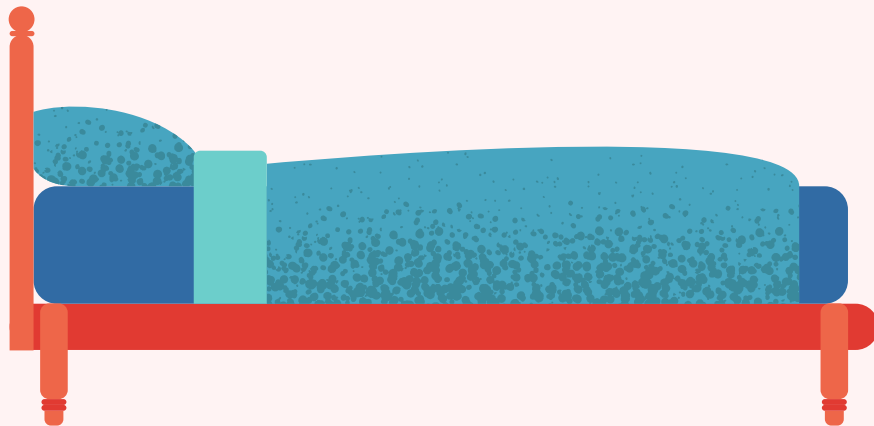
REGULAR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Getting regular exercise can help reduce your overall levels of stress and anxiety.

To get more regular physical activity, consider:

- Joining an intramural or club sport
- Asking a friend to be your workout buddy
- Going to classes offered at the Rec
- Taking a PE class

CREATING A BEDTIME ROUTINE



WHY CREATE A BEDTIME ROUTINE?

If you often experience racing thoughts at night that make it hard to sleep, having a bedtime routine can help train your mind to **slow down** and **prepare for sleep**.

HOW TO MAKE A BEDTIME ROUTINE

- Pick a few activities you want to do **every night** before you get in bed.
- Try adding a **relaxing activity** that can preemptively address racing thoughts you might have.

Consider using some of the following in your bedtime routine:

- Stretching or doing yoga
- Journaling about your day
- Writing down a to-do list for the following day
- Diffusing/smelling calming essential oils
- Drinking a mug of tea

FOR MORE RESOURCES...

Check out the OHP website and look at our **Bulletin Boards, SWA Stalls**, and **Nook Activities**. Or request a **Wellness Workshop!**



carleton.edu/health-promotion/resources/

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*Exercises are drawn from OHP Nook activities. Please visit carleton.edu/health-promotion/resources/ for sources and more details.