



Mass General Brigham

Building Your Coping Skills

Employee Assistance Program

Free, Confidential Support for Work&Life
Contact us at (866) 724-4327 eap.partners.org

Building Your Coping Skills

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet was created by Mass General Brigham Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to provide a selection of coping skills, tips, and techniques for enhancing stress resilience, managing anxiety, and calming the mind and body during periods of emotional unease or distress.

Each person is unique, therefore we have included a selection of options with which you can experiment, and from which you can choose what works best for you. Learning and practicing some of the techniques in this booklet can help you:

- Develop skills for dealing with difficult emotions, people and situations
- Feel calmer, more grounded and focused
- Interrupt “over-thinking” (rumination), cultivate increased awareness of your thoughts and how they affect your moods
- Become more conscious of and intentional about caring for yourself

Grounding Techniques

Grounding techniques are coping strategies designed to help “ground” you in the present moment and can be helpful to use when you're feeling panicked, out of control, or about to dissociate. Generally, the more senses you involve, the more effectively you can ground.

Physical Grounding

- Use your body's contact with the floor or chair. Let yourself become very aware of your feet connecting to the floor, your arms on the arm rest of the chair, every place that your back connects to the chair back. Make a tight fist. Be aware of tightening and loosening your fist.
- Pick up or hold items near you. Are the items warm or cool? Hard or soft? Heavy or light? Notice the textures of the item. Identify the colors and name each one specifically, such as turquoise or crimson.
- Keep something in your pocket that you can taste, like a mint or a throat lozenge. This should be something that has pleasant associations for you. Focus on the taste and savor it.
- Go outdoors. Feel connected to the natural world. Depending on the season—dig in the dirt, hear snow crunch underfoot, feel the sun on your face.

Mental Grounding

Try the 5-4-3-2-1 method.

Use your senses to list:

- 5)you can SEE,
- 4)you can FEEL,
- 3)you can HEAR,
- 2)you can SMELL,
- 1)you can TASTE.

Remind yourself of where you are in time and place:

"I am (your name). Today is (the date). I am at (the place).

If you can, say this out loud and listen to yourself.

- Describe your environment in detail, using all of your senses for example, "The walls are white, there are five blue chairs, there is a wooden bookshelf against the wall..." Describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, shapes, numbers, and temperature. You can do this anywhere.
- Prepare for situations that might affect you negatively. Mentally rehearse what you would like to do to handle them.
- Play a "categories" game with yourself. Choose one or two broad categories, such as types of dogs, famous people, songs, or TV shows. Take a minute or two to mentally list as many things from each category as you can.
- Count backwards from 100 or say the alphabet, very slowly.

Soothing Grounding

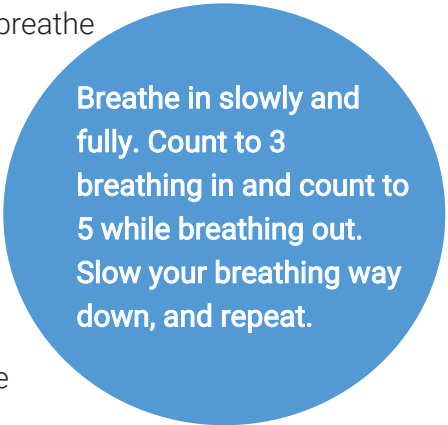
Repeat kind, compassionate phrases to yourself, as if you were talking to a friend or a child: "You're having a rough time, but you'll make it through." or "You're trying hard, and you're doing the best you can."

- If you feel upset or distressed, visualize someone positive in your life. Imagine their face or think of what their voice sounds like. Imagine them telling you that the moment is tough, but that you'll get through it.

Self Soothing

It is important to quiet stress and anxiety in healthy ways that we can feel good about. Often we automatically try to calm ourselves with over-eating, nail biting, twirling or pulling hair, drinking, smoking, “retail therapy” or too much screen-time. Explore some new ways to manage your distress or remember effective ways you have calmed yourself down in the past. Know yourself and plan accordingly. Help yourself remember at first by writing down your top three on a sticky note, or in your phone to keep with you. Here are some suggestions:

- Focus your eyes, or your mind on something beautiful and peaceful. Remember to breathe while you gaze upon an object. Notice it’s color, shape, reflections, lines and weight. Perhaps something you enjoy holding or a photo of a person, pet or place with positive memories.
- Pamper yourself. Immerse yourself in a warm bath, clean sheets, or sit with sun on your face. Hydrate with a glass of water or herbal tea. Massage your hands, face or feet. Adjust your lighting or room temperature to help your mood. Maybe light a candle and enjoy the glow. Perhaps use incense, essential oils or a favorite lotion or perfume.



Breathe in slowly and fully. Count to 3 breathing in and count to 5 while breathing out. Slow your breathing way down, and repeat.

- Listen to your music. Make playlists which make you happy, or calm. Sing to yourself. Hum a soft, pleasant tune or use a line from a favorite song like a mantra when you need to calm down or remove a disturbing thought.
- Get yourself something special to eat that will nourish your body. Focus on quality rather than quantity. Savor it and enjoy the treat.
- Read something you find soothing or inspirational. A poem, a card or note, prayer, scripture or quote. Keep this accessible for times when you need to settle yourself.
- Get active. Shoot hoops, Hit golf balls. Weed the garden. Do some stretching. Bring order to a messy room.
- Change the scenery. Go out into nature. Be with growing things. Use all your senses to immerse yourself.
- Put on music and dance, or do art of any kind. Play music, cook, sketch, sing, color, journal, anything you enjoy without pressure.
- Treat yourself as you would a friend. Perhaps you have a “go-to” message you say to comfort others such as “this too shall pass”, or “it will be ok ” you can tell yourself.
- Practice self-compassion. Ask yourself “what am I feeling?” “What do I need right now? ” or say a brief prayer in your mind such as a self compassion meditation:
“May I be healthy, May I be safe, May I ride the waves of my life with ease”.
- Connect with a friend, a loved one or a pet.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation is the antidote to the stress response and anxiety. All the grounding, self-soothing and distracting techniques are efforts to reduce tension and build resilience.

- Brief tension release exercise: Sit comfortably. Starting at the top of your head and working gradually down through your entire body, tense and release muscle groups. Take your time. As you tense each place, feel the tension. Release the tension. Feel the comfort.
- Using breath to release: Make yourself comfortable. Take a deep breath. Push the air out by tensing your chest, stomach and abdominal muscles. Feel the tension and strength of your muscles. Now release it. Feel the comfort. Now let yourself breathe naturally. Focus on the breathing. Slow it down. Feel the relaxation spread.
- Use the breath to relax: Find a comfortable chair. Let yourself breathe. Say calming words in rhythm to your breathing, such as: calm, serene, tranquil, restful, gentle, quiet, peaceful, settled. Focus on each word. Savor it. Let yourself settle more and more.
- Move for relaxation: Identify the most relaxed part of your body. Focus on the relaxed feeling. Imagine it spreading to other parts of the body. Let yourself breathe. Be aware of how much control you have in moving a calm state to wherever you need it. Maybe visualize your breath moving through your body, or imagine the relaxation as a color or a warm liquid bringing relaxation through your body to deepen the experience.



Autogenic Training

Autogenic relaxation can be done sitting in a chair or lying down. Close your eyes and take a deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Take another deep breath in.

- Think the thought: "my right foot is heavy, warm and relaxed. My left foot is heavy, warm and relaxed. Both my feet are heavy, warm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "My right leg is heavy, warm and relaxed. My left leg is heavy, warm and relaxed. Both my legs are heavy, warm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "My belly is heavy, warm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "My heart is calm, open and relaxed." Repeat two more times. Breathe in deeply and exhale.
- "My shoulders and arms are heavy, warm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "My head and neck are heavy, warm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "My face is cool, calm and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- "I am warm, calm, safe and relaxed." Repeat two more times.
- Slowly breathe in and out, open your eyes and return to the room.

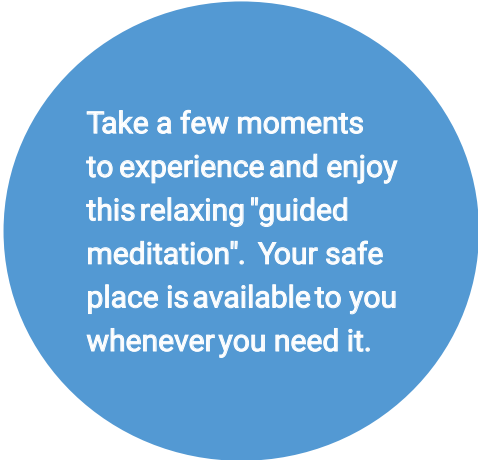
Safe Spaces

Imagining a place that is safe, protected, and comfortable for you can be a great help when you are under stress. If you fully develop the image a number of times when you are not over-stressed, the safe place will be readily available for you whenever you need it. To begin, find a comfortable position and close your eyes, if that feels safe, or allow your eyes to rest on your lap or something in front of you.

Once you settle in notice your body. How does it feel? Let your body begin to relax by releasing the areas of tension by breathing. Take slow deep breaths and as you exhale let the tension go. Allow your breathing to gradually slow down. As you do this, allow yourself to picture in your mind's eye, a safe place. What is the first place that comes to mind? What type of place does your mind choose as a safe place?


- Maybe you are in a beautiful garden, in an open field or the beach, or just in the comfort of your bedroom.
- Picture a place that feels calm, safe, and serene. A place you feel safe and protected. Imagine the details of your surroundings. Involve all of your senses.
- What do you see? What sounds do you hear? What do you smell? Taste? What sensations do you experience?
- Imagine yourself settling in and getting comfortable.

- Continue to be aware of your breathing. Keep it slow and deep and steady. Enhance the image as fully as you wish.
- Allow yourself the experience of being relaxed and completely safe. If you find yourself tensing or moving out of the image, just refocus your attention on your breathing and start again.
- Notice as you become part of your safe place that you feel more rested, more relaxed, more at peace.
- After you have thoroughly visualized this place and you are ready to leave, allow yourself to come back into the room and leave your safe place for now, knowing that you can return to your safe place anytime you like.
- Open your eyes but stay in a relaxed position taking a moment to reawaken completely. Continue to breathe smoothly and rhythmically.



**Take a few moments
to experience and enjoy
this relaxing "guided
meditation". Your safe
place is available to you
whenever you need it.**

Distraction Techniques



Distraction techniques are ways of taking your mind off something by focusing your attention on something else. Distressing thoughts and feelings can be overwhelming.

It can be difficult to manage thoughts while they are flooding your mind and creating tension in your body. Distracting yourself can be a way to re-set your thinking and quiet your internal chatter so you can feel calmer and more in control.

- Call a friend to check in and talk about an unrelated subject.
- Play some music and if you have headphones, use them to reduce outside sounds. Listen to a podcast about something that interests you or makes you happy.
- If you have a pet, give them some affection or attention.

- Read something absorbing that has no connection to the thing causing your anxiety, sadness, or other difficult feelings.
- Exercise – even ten minutes of exercise can help re-set your mood.
- Impose some order on one small area – clear out your backpack or briefcase, or organize your desk or your junk drawer.
- If the distressing thought keeps recurring, try wearing a rubber-band on your wrist and snapping it when the thought recurs. Run cold water over your wrists, or wash your face.
- Write a letter or send an email to someone you love. Tell them what you admire, appreciate or value about them. Send it.

Distancing

Sometimes it is helpful to be able to distance from feelings or thoughts that are disturbing - at least until you have gained the skills and tools to deal with them. This is different from dissociation because you are actively deciding to distance and you are controlling how you do it.

The following are strategies for separating yourself from your anxiety in a healthy way.

- Go to your "safe place."
- Imagine yourself in a bubble. Whatever is bothering you is on the outside. You are safe inside. The bubble can be as big or as small as you need it to be. It can be clear or opaque. You can decide how much you want to be aware of what is distressing you.
- Imagine a wall between you and the situation. Build it as high and as thick as you need to.
- Compartmentalize. Promise yourself that you will think about the problem at a certain time of day for a certain amount of time. You can live the rest of your day without dealing with it.

- Refuse to think about whatever is bothering you. Imagine it is a lead safe. Lock the door. Put chains around it and send it to a hole in the bottom of the ocean.
- Use Humor. Imagine an elephant sitting on whatever is making you anxious. Imagine transporting it into outer space. Use your own imagination to come up with something absurd to put distance between you and whatever is bothering you.
- Insulate yourself from whatever is worrying or bothering you.



- Put it down on paper. Share the burden and responsibility of your worry with the paper as a way of releasing yourself from holding this. Then either put the paper away somewhere out of view, or you can crumple the paper into a ball, or you can shred the paper.


Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a state of mind in which the goal is to maintain a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. Being mindful allows us to open up to what is truly going on and to live our lives in a more present space. It helps to give us an appreciation for the world around us and to center ourselves in that world.

Establishing a daily mindful practice relaxes the body and helps to reduce stress. There are numerous ways that one can engage in mindfulness:

- Eat mindfully; notice the color and presentation of your food, register how it smells. When you chew, note the texture, its taste, and enjoy it.
- Focus on your breath; try this breath awareness meditation for 5 minutes each day: close your eyes or keep them open but maintain a low gaze. Find a comfortable seat on your chair. Bring your awareness to your belly as you in-hale and exhale through your nose.


- Notice the belly rising as you inhale and lowering as you exhale. Feel the movement of your belly as you notice the length of the inhale and the length of the exhale, without attempting to change anything.
- Shift your attention now to the ribcage and feel your ribs expanding to the side as you inhale slowly, deeply and steadily. Notice the length of the exhale as you shrink your torso all the way to the upper part of your lungs. Allow the exhale to lower your upper chest, ribs and belly. Continue feeling your belly rising and falling, your ribcage expanding.
- As you inhale, notice the upper chest lifting and the air traveling.
- Do a mindful movement exercise: stand up with your arms at your sides, palms out. Inhale while lifting your arms and meet your hands together overhead. Exhale and return your arms to your sides. Repeat 5 times.



**Enjoy the moment.
Delight in simple
pleasures and don't be
afraid to laugh.
Find humor in your day.**

Caring for Yourself and Others

Here are some tips for small ways to do the things that help you feel better. Remember to not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Just do what you can. Even small acts can make a real difference.



When things get difficult, caring for ourselves can drop to the bottom of a long list of priorities.

- Eat enough food, and do what you can to eat real food. You don't have to be a nutritional superstar, but try to eat fruit and/or vegetables and some protein each day. If you have time to pack your own lunch, you will have a better chance of eating healthy food and will save money as well. Try not to let yourself get too hungry; hunger makes us irritable and affects our ability to think clearly.
- Helping others makes us feel better. Do something for someone who needs your help. Consider volunteering at a soup kitchen, a food bank, or for an organization whose mission reflects your values or beliefs. You will feel good knowing you are putting your values into action, you are likely to meet people who share your values, and you will get "paid" in gratitude and appreciation.

- Sleep is good for us – and sleep deprivation increases feelings of anxiety, tension, irritability, and mental confusion. Think of sleep as a kind of “nutritional supplement”. If you struggle often with falling asleep or staying asleep through the night (insomnia) consider speaking with your doctor or a therapist about it.
- Move your body – any way that works for you – as many times a week as you can. The benefits of exercise are too numerous to list here, but you don’t have to be a marathon runner or join a gym. If you can’t make regular exercise part of your life right now, try taking the stairs instead of the elevator, put on some music and dance with your kids. Try doing housework or yard work, bed making, vacuuming, raking leaves, taking out the trash – briskly, energetically, using your whole body. Anything that gets you moving is a good thing.
- Check in with people you care about, especially those who are struggling with loss, loneliness, or stress.
- Call someone, or send them a note – and focus on the other person, resist the urge to tell them your problems, let the call be about them – or offer to do an errand for them or help them in some way.