

# Dealing with stress

This Special Resource sheet focuses on things you can do to help manage feeling stressed and other bad feelings, ones that take only a few seconds to a few minutes. It includes strategies to help you relax, ones designed to give you more energy, and others just to distract you. It does not deal with strategies that take longer to do or require lots of time to learn. If you want to improve your overall ability to deal with stress, there are lots of resources you can find on the Internet.

The strategies we describe can work any time you feel a need to regain or maintain your composure, not just when you are craving a cigarette.

## DEEP BREATHING

The key to using breathing to help you relax is to use your stomach. Draw the breath in by pushing your stomach out and letting your chest move up (try not to move your back), then breathe out by pulling your stomach in and letting your chest drop a bit.

Breathe in gradually through your nose as you count to five, take in as much as you can. Then hold your breath to a count of 10 (if you can last that long), then let it out gradually. As an alternative you can let it out in a rush, through your mouth. Concentrate on how your body feels during the exercise, particularly as the air comes out. You can feel your body relaxing. Repeat this a couple of times (if you have time) – 3 is a good number of repetitions to aim for. Each breath should result in you feeling just a little more relaxed. The extra oxygen you get by taking deep breaths can also make you feel more alert and able to cope.

As an alternative, do the exercise with your stomach held in, expanding your chest and the area just below as much as you can. When you breathe out, let your stomach relax.

Hint: It can help to put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Then depending on what you are trying to do, one should stay fairly still and the other move a lot as you breathe in and out.

If you would like to watch a demonstration of a deep breathing technique there is one at:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2KwJu650E4>.

## STRETCHING

You can do stretches standing up or sitting down. You can also choose to stretch a part of your body (e.g., one hand) through to stretching most of your body (e.g., standing on tip toes and stretching both arms as far up as you can with your fingers stretched out as well).

For whatever parts you decide to stretch, hold the stretch for a count of five (at least). Some options are:

## SITTING OR STANDING

Joining your hands together, turning them inside out and pushing your arms out as far above your head as they will go.

Doing the same exercise with your palms together.

Stretching your arms out wide and pushing them as far back as they will go.

If you do the above standing you can do them either standing with your feet together flat on the floor or standing on tip toe.

## STANDING ONLY

Standing straight with your legs together and your arms by your side, push one arm down as far as it will go down your leg, hold for five, then reverse and push the other down as far as it will go.

Stand straight with either hands on hips or spread out. Twist your upper body as far as you can in one direction (right or left), hold for five, then slowly reverse and push the other way, hold for five then return to the straight position.

## SITTING

### (THIS CAN ALSO BE DONE LYING DOWN)

Stretch your feet out in front of you, then pull your toes back as hard as you can (feel it in the back of your calves), hold for a count of five, then relax, and/or point your toes out as far as you can, again hold for five (feel the tension in the front of your calves), and then relax.

## TENSE AND RELAX

This is part of a technique called Progressive Muscle Relaxation where you systematically tense and relax all the muscle groups in your body. Here just pick one or two, best if they are areas that are feeling tense (but any body part will do). Make sure it isn't a muscle you could injure. Sit or lie comfortably, then as you take in a deep breath, tense the muscles you have chosen (e.g., make your hands into tight fists hold your breath and the muscles tight for the count of 10 (if you can last that long), then let go as you breathe out. All the while focus your mind on what you are experiencing, the tension while tensing, and the flow of relaxation as you let go. Notice the way the body parts become limp and loose. Breathe slowly for a few seconds while you enjoy the relaxed feeling.

Repeat this with as many parts of the body as you have time. Doing each tense then relax cycle twice is also good.

## MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness involves focusing on what is happening right now, your 'moment-to-moment' experience - both internal and external. You should avoid thinking about the past or the future, what the feelings or thoughts mean, or on what is happening somewhere else, just focus on what is happening here and now. If thoughts about other things come into your mind (they will!), simply note that they have occurred and return your focus to the present. It is impossible to focus on everything that is happening here and now, so you need to choose something. Mindfulness is at the core of meditation techniques. It can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or simply noticing. It can be very useful when you are in a situation when you can't use most of the other strategies (e.g., in an important meeting). Here you can keep your focus not only on what is being said but also on how it is being said (e.g., the tone of voice, any accent, choice of words etc).

## FOCUS YOUR ATTENTION ON SOMETHING SIMPLE

Another form of meditation bring you into the present by focusing your attention on something simple, like a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words, or the flickering light from a candle, others on taking a more focused look at what is actually happening.

- You may meditate with eyes open or closed. Also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.
- An observant, noncritical attitude. Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don't fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

This is the start of a common form of meditation, but you only need to do it for a few seconds to get an initial benefit. Persist for longer and it can have more benefits, but that is beyond the scope of this advice sheet.

### **MAKE YOURSELF SMILE**

Just making your face smile can make you feel better. If that is too hard, then think of something that makes you smile and allow yourself to express it as strongly as you can. You will be surprised at how much better this can make you feel.

### **IMAGINE SOMETHING PLEASANT**

Many people like to image a peaceful scene, such as a beach or a forest, but you can also try imagining a situation you enjoy: your team winning a match or meeting someone special. Picture it as vividly as you can – everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many details as possible, using as many of your senses as you can.

Don't spend too long on this exercise, it is enough to have begun to feel good. When you are ready, hold on to the positive feeling and return to what you were doing.

### **LEAVE THE SITUATION FOR A SHORT TIME**

Go for a walk around the block, walk up and down a couple of flights of stairs, do a tour of your building. While it might be nice to take 10-15 minutes for this and thus improve your overall health, even a minute or two can help you feel better.

If all else fails, and you are in a situation which is difficult to leave, take a toilet break. It is one of the few excuses to get away for a few minutes that's usually credible.

### **FOCUS ON ENJOYING A DRINK (WATER IS BEST)**

Focus as you sip it, try to concentrate on the liquid in your mouth and then follow it down your throat as you swallow. Give it all your attention if you can. Trying to answer questions like: "What does it taste like?" and "How does it feel in your mouth?" can help you keep your focus. Drink the whole glass (or until you have had enough) keeping your focus on what you are doing.

### **TALK TO A FRIEND**

This is a strategy for people who like chatting to others. If a friend is around, swap a bit of gossip, or if you feel safe doing so, tell them about the problem you are having.

### **DO STUFF ON YOUR PHONE**

Tidy up your inbox and outbox, check you have all those you want in your contacts. You can even play a game if you have time, or work through your contacts to find someone you would like to chat to. Give them a call if you have time.

### **PUT IT OFF TILL LATER**

If you are having cravings or unwanted thoughts, make a firm decision to deal with them at some specified time within the next hour (or after the activity they are disrupting). When the time comes, if you haven't forgotten (this is a good thing), then spend some time thinking about what you need to do. Make sure it is a time when you are not craving a cigarette.



## **LISTEN TO MUSIC**

Really listen, if there are vocals try to follow the words.

## **SELF TALK**

The power of positive thinking: Tell yourself how strong you are and how you are going to overcome everything quitting smoking might throw at you. Imagine yourself crushing every cigarette that comes your way. You are the quitting superman (or woman) and nothing can get in your way. Think like this and it will make it easier to succeed.

## **HUMOUR**

Laughter is a great way of reducing stress and anxiety. Tell yourself a joke, try to find the funny side of the situation you are in, play a comedy cd.

## **WHEN YOU HAVE TO KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON WHAT IS HAPPENING**

When you are in some social situations, like a meeting or with an important guest, many of the above strategies may not be appropriate. However, some form of mindfulness almost always is.

Concentrate fully on what is happening. Do this more deeply than you normally would. You can do this by asking yourself questions like “Does this have any implications for me?”, “Why is this issue being brought up now?”, or whatever questions seem relevant or by focusing on the way things are said, not just what is being said.

If you become aware that your mind has drifted back to thinking about smoking (or anything you don’t want to think about), make a mental note that this has happened, and then return to your focus on what is important. If the thought will not go away, commit yourself to dealing with it when the current event is over. Sometimes it helps to write yourself a note to do this.

An alternative, that may be possible, is to tell the person/people you are with the reason you are having trouble concentrating. For some people, just bringing it up can make the need to act seem less intense.

## **CONCLUDING COMMENT**

We can only keep a limited number of things in our mind at any one time. Doing something or focusing on something that is not stressful leaves less room for thoughts about smoking or other stress provoking thoughts to fill your mind. Working on your body (e.g., stretching and relaxing) can also have more direct effects by making your body more relaxed, which can help make cravings to smoke decrease in strength.