

Participant Guide

# Practical Stress Reduction Tools



## Overview

In times of stress, we can attempt to change the circumstances we find ourselves in, and/or, change our responses to stress to minimize its adverse effects on our minds and bodies.

In this seminar, we will practice tools that will reduce physical, mental and emotional stress, enhance a sense of calmness, and increase our presence to meet life's challenges.



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### Agenda

- Calming Breathwork
- Harnessing the Mind
- Mood Enhancing Visualization
- Present Moment Awareness
- Energizing the Body



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Our agenda today will focus on how to use simple practices to lower stress quickly and return to a state of equilibrium. We will start with the breath and explore various breathing techniques, then move on to harnessing what we call our 'monkey minds', minds that flit from one unhelpful thought to another. We will then explore how visualization can create a sense of calmness, then practice bringing all our attention to the present moment. As mindfulness teaches us, this present moment is all we have, and we can practice bringing our full selves to it. Finally, we will spend a few minutes energizing the body with breath and stretching exercises.

## Breath Focus

- Deep Belly
- Breath Focus
- 5-5 Coherent Breathing
- 4-4-4-4 Square Breathing
- 4-7-8 Breathing



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## DEEP BELLY

1. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach somewhere above your belly button.
2. Breathe in through your nose, noticing your stomach rise. Your chest should remain relatively still.
3. Purse your lips and exhale through your mouth. Try engaging your stomach muscles to push air out at the end of the breath.

For this type of breathing to become automatic, you'll need to practice it daily. Try doing the exercise three or four times a day for up to 5 minutes.

## BREATH FOCUS

When deep breathing is focused and slow, it can help reduce anxiety. You can do this practice by sitting or lying down in a quiet, comfortable location. As you exhale, your heart rate slows. Repeated deep breaths will naturally bring your heart rate more in sync with your breath. This leads your brain to release endorphins, which are chemicals that have a natural calming effect.

1. Notice how it feels when you **inhale and exhale normally**. Mentally scan your body. You might feel tension in your body that you never noticed.
2. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose.
3. Notice your belly and upper body expanding.
4. Exhale in whatever way is most comfortable for you, **sighing** if you wish.
5. Do this for several minutes, paying attention to the rise and fall of your belly.
6. Choose a word to focus on and vocalize during your **inhale**. Words like “safe” and “calm” can be effective.
7. Or imagine your inhale washing over you like a gentle wave. Perhaps you can choose a soothing color to inhale, blue or green.
8. Imagine your **exhale** carrying negative and upsetting thoughts and energy away from you. Or imagine a color that expresses hot emotions, like red or hot pink.
9. When you get distracted, gently bring your attention back to your breath and your words or colors.

## 5-5 COHERENT BREATHING

Resonant breathing, also called Coherent or Equal breathing, can help you calm anxiety and experience a relaxed state.

1. Sit or lie down and close your eyes
2. Gently breathe in through your nose, mouth closed, **inhale for a count of five**
3. Don't fill your lungs too full of air
4. **Exhale for five seconds**, allowing your breath to leave your body slowly and gently. Don't force it.
5. Repeat

Take a few additional minutes to be still and focus on how your body feels

#### 4-4-4-4 SQUARE BREATHING

The square breathing practice engages the mind as well as the breath.

1. We inhale to the count of 4
2. Hold the breath to the count of 4
3. Exhale to the count of 4
4. And rest to the count of 4
5. Repeat


While doing this, imagine you are creating a square or a box in your mind, starting at the lower left end of the box and traveling up (inhaling), traveling over the top (holding), down the right side (exhaling), and resting across the lower end to complete the square.

#### 4-7-8 BREATHING

The extended exhalation of breath releases tension. Elongating the exhalation will sedate the nervous system. Although this exercise calls for 4-7-8, you can vary the count as long as the exhalation is twice as long as the inhalation for the calming effect to occur.


When your exhale is even a few counts longer than your inhale, **the vagus nerve** (running from the neck down through the diaphragm) sends a signal to your brain to turn up your parasympathetic nervous system and turn down your sympathetic nervous system.

1. Inhale to the count of 4
2. Hold to the count of 7
3. Exhale to the count of 8
4. Repeat



## Harnessing the Mind

- Breaking the anxious thought cycle: *Stop, Come Back, Focus*
- Creating Mantra & Affirmation
- Floating away on a cloud

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## **BREAKING THE ANXIOUS THOUGHT CYCLE**

It can be hard to think clearly when you feel anxious. Sometimes anxious thinking can lead us to believe harmful thoughts that are untrue or make us do things that make our anxiety worse. It can be helpful to interrupt automatic, stress-inducing thoughts to maintain clarity and presence.

### **STOP, COME BACK, FOCUS**

1. Stop the stress-inducing thought by firmly saying internally (or externally) STOP or NO
2. Come back to the present moment by asking yourself a question (some examples):
3. "What should I focus on right now?"
4. "What is this present moment asking of me?"
5. "What's in front of me?"
6. "How can I take good care of myself now?"
7. "What do I need right now?"

## **CREATING MANTRA & AFFIRMATION**

Repetitive mantra calms the mind and lowers stress, while affirming personal power. Create a sound, a word, or a phrase that either has meaning for you, or captures your attention.

Some examples of affirmative mantras:

Stress-Relief Mantra #1: With every breath, I feel myself relaxing

Stress-Relief Mantra #2: I have control over how I feel, and I choose to feel at peace

Stress-Relief Mantra #3: All experiences are helping me grow

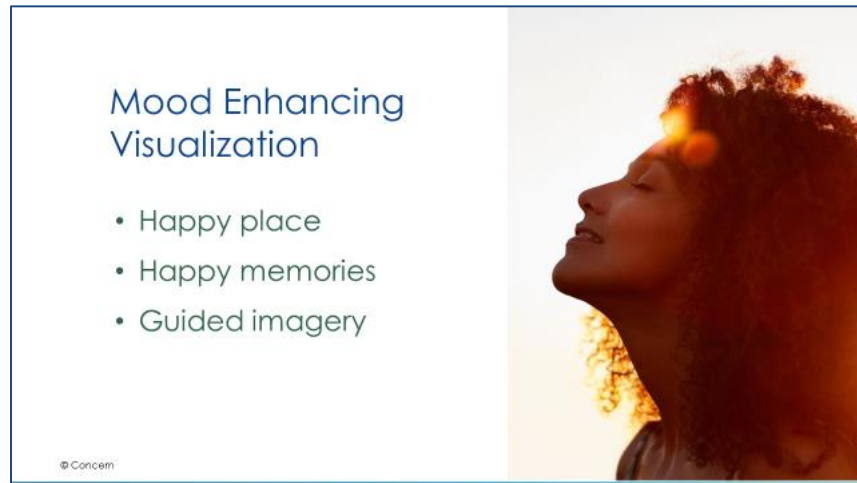
Stress-Relief Mantra #4: I give myself permission to let go of what no longer serves me

### **FLOATING AWAY ON A CLOUD**

Practice imagining a future worry, or a past regret, floating away on a cloud. As it enters your mind, close your eyes and watch this beautiful, voluminous, white cloud gently carry it away, revealing a bright blue sky

### **PLAN A 5-MINUTE WORRY TIME**

If you suffer from intrusive worry, tell your obsessive mind that you will worry about this issue at a certain time in the future. Setting aside a short period of time later that day to worry will ease the troubled mind. Make sure you set a clock for 5 minutes; it will be easier to get off the 'train' if you keep it short. Keep your word.



## MOOD-ENHANCING VISUALIZATION

When we mentally 'put' ourselves in places that carry positive memories, we experience the feelings associated with that happy place and moment in time. Taking a mental mini vacation provides respite from the stressful present; it is important to engage in this practice consciously, so that you do not endanger yourself with distraction.

HAPPY PLACE

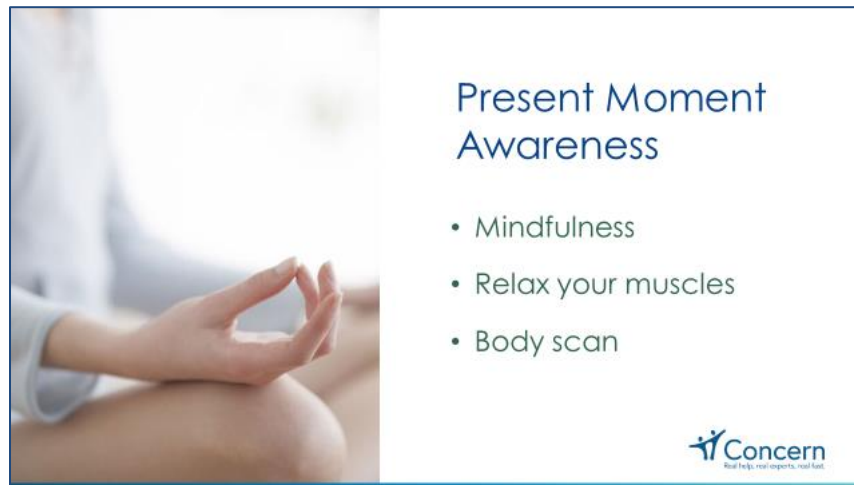
HAPPY MEMORIES

### GUIDED IMAGERY

This technique is great for lessening anxiety, relaxing and building confidence. It only takes a few minutes to learn and is actually very powerful. To begin, get in a relaxed position, close your eyes, breathe slowly and deeply.

1. Inhale, and as you exhale, touch your thumb to your index finger. Recall a time you felt spent after a day of hiking, swimming, gardening, or some other **pleasurable activity**. Breathe deeply and try to feel the heaviness of your muscles and a feeling of satisfaction.
2. Next, touch your thumb to your middle finger and think of a time when you had a **loving experience** – when you felt a strong sense of closeness or connection with someone, like an intimate physical experience, or a deep and fulfilling conversation.
3. Now, touch your thumb to your ring finger and recall a **compliment or an acknowledgment of your efforts**. Listen. Take it in. Try to fully accept it now.
4. Finally, touch your thumb to your little finger. As you do, reflect on the most **beautiful place** you have ever been. Let yourself soak in the environment – the colors, light, breeze, sounds, textures and smells. Allow yourself to stay in this place and rest there for a while.





## PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS

### MINDFULNESS

MINDFULNESS is the practice of being present in your current state and surroundings, gently and without judgment. Staying present can help you create a calm state of mind when you feel your thoughts racing and anxiety is building.

Where Am I?

What Do I See?

How Do I feel?

1. Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit and close your eyes.
2. Notice how your breathing and body feel.
3. Now shift your awareness to your senses as you observe your surroundings. Ask yourself *What's happening outside of my body?* Notice what you see, hear, smell, and feel in your environment.
4. Change your awareness several times from your body to your environment and back again until your anxiety starts to fade.

## **RELAX BY COUNTING**

Counting is a simple way to ease your anxiety. When you feel anxiety washing over you, find a quiet and comfortable place to sit. Close your eyes and slowly count to 10. If necessary, repeat and count to 20 or an even higher number. Keep counting until you feel your anxiety subsiding.

Sometimes this relief occurs quickly, but other times it might take a while. Stay calm and patient. Counting can relax you because it gives you something to focus on besides your anxiety. It's a great tool to use in a crowded or busy space like a store or train where other anxiety exercises might be more challenging to carry out.

## **RELAX YOUR MUSCLES**

### **TENSE & RELEASE**

When you feel anxious, you might notice strain or tension in your muscles. This muscle stress can make your anxiety more difficult to manage in the moment you're experiencing it. By relieving the stress in your muscles, you can usually reduce your anxiety levels.

To quickly relieve your muscle tension during moments of anxiety:

1. Sit in a quiet and comfortable place. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Breathe slowly into your nose and out of your mouth.
2. Use your hand to make a tight fist. Squeeze your fist tightly.
3. Hold your squeezed fist for a few seconds. Notice all the tension you feel in your hand.
4. Slowly open your fingers and be aware of how you feel. You may notice a feeling of tension leaving your hand. Eventually, your hand will feel lighter and more relaxed.
5. Continue tensing and then releasing various muscle groups in your body, from your hands, legs, shoulders, or feet. You may want to work your way up and down your body tensing various muscle groups. Avoid tensing the muscles in any area of your body where you're injured or in pain, as that may further aggravate your injury.

## BODY SCAN

1. **Get comfortable.** Lying down is preferable, particularly if you're doing a body scan meditation before going to sleep. If that's not possible or comfortable, sitting comfortably is also an option.
2. **Take a few deep breaths.**
3. **Bring awareness to your feet.** Begin by observing sensations in your feet. If you notice pain, acknowledge it and any thoughts or emotions that accompany it, and gently breathe through it.
4. **Breathe into the tension.** If you notice any uncomfortable sensations, focus your attention on them. Breathe into them and see what happens. Visualize the tension leaving your body through your breath and evaporating into the air. Move on when you feel ready.
5. **Scan your entire body.** Continue this practice with each area of your body, gradually moving up through your feet until you reach the top of your head. Notice how you feel and where you're holding your stress. If there's any tightness, pain, or pressure, continue to breathe into any tightness, pain, or pressure you're feeling. This can help you release tension in your body now and be more aware of it in the future so you can release it then, too.



## ENERGIZED BREATH

Inhale through the nose with a short, sharp **inhalation** followed directly by a long, strong inhale. Then without pausing, exhale through the nose and mouth with a **short, then long exhalation**. Repeat 5 times then pause for a short break before beginning your next round.

## STRETCH

1. Raise your shoulders to your ears while inhaling. Exhale while dropping your shoulders, repeat. The tension you hold in your neck and shoulders will release.
2. Place your left hand onto your right shoulder. With your right hand, grab your left elbow and gently pull your shoulder toward you. Change hands: right hand on left shoulder; with left hand, gently pull right shoulder toward you.

## DOUBLE BREATH WITH STRETCH

Begin by bringing your arms straight out and together, in front of you, with hands clenched. Double inhale through your nose while opening your arms out to each side, unclenching your hands. Double exhale through your mouth while bringing your raised arms back to center, unclenching your fists. Repeat.

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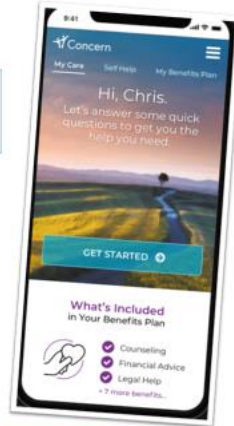
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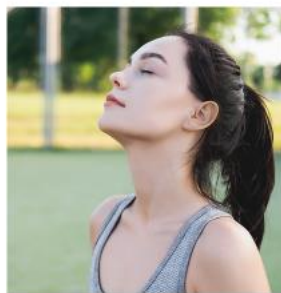
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