

Calming Techniques



Many of the techniques in this handout are designed to help you when you might be experiencing stress, overwhelm or anxiety. These states are caused when the brain and body perceive that it is potentially under threat or danger or if an experience is too overwhelming for our resources to handle. This threat can be in the form of an actual physical attack i.e a threat to our physical body through experiencing abuse, accident etc, or a threat to our ego and the way we perceive our self in the world. i.e. struggling with the mortgage, not getting a promotion, missing out on an opportunity etc. Regardless of what kind of threat, the body and brain will engage the survival response which prepares us to fight, run away or freeze. It doesn't know the difference between a real or imagined attack or the thoughts we tell ourselves.

Unfortunately we are the only animal that can turn our stress response on by thought alone. You do not need to do all the techniques in this hand out, try them and do the ones that work best for you. However, it is important to do these techniques not just when you are feeling stressed or anxious but all the time, as this will help build your bank account of resilience for times when you are more stressed.

Calming Physical Responses

1. Deep Breathing

When we are stressed or anxious, we tend to take short rapid shallow breaths into the upper part of our chest in order to get more oxygen into our body to be able to fight or run. However, this style of breathing interrupts the exchange of gasses in our body, decreasing the amount of CO₂ in the blood and inadvertently, keeping the body in the stress response. Controlled belly breathing for at least 10 times a few times a day, increases oxygenation, slows the heart rate, massages the internal organs in the body, helps pump the cerebral spinal fluid around the brain and initiates the release of some feel good hormones and endorphins. There are many ways to calm your breathing down. It doesn't seem to matter which you use as long as it is a slow out breath. These are my favourites.

To bring your breathing under control:

- Exhale completely.
- Then take a deep breath in through your nose. (If you are able to) then another quick breath
- Expand your diaphragm/belly to bring air into the lower portion of your lungs.
- As you gradually fill your lungs from bottom to top, expand your chest, but don't raise your shoulders.
- Briefly pause your breathing (and your thoughts).
- Then relax and let the air flow smoothly and slowly out through your nose or mouth if unable to breathe through your nose.

Enjoy the emptiness for a few seconds.

Then begin another breath.

Square breathing

Some people find it useful to think of a square when they are deep breathing.

- breath in for 4 counts.
- hold for 4 counts,
- breath out for 4 counts
- pause for 4 counts.

Alternate nostril breathing.

Close your right nostril off with your thumb on the side of the nostril and breath in through the left nostril. Place your index finger on the side of the left nostril to close that off while you breath out through your right nostril. Then breath in through the right nostril, close that off with your thumb again and breath out through your left nostril. Do this about 5 times each side.

Blowing bubbles

Blowing bubbles can be a fun way to concentrate on your deep breathing plus keep you in the present moment

2. Vagus Nerve Activation

The Vagus nerve is a major nerve controlling our stress response and goes down the neck close to the vocal chords. Simply humming the sound "voooooooooo" deeply in the throat, deactivates the Vagus Nerve helping it and you to relax.

3. Sleep Well – Implement good sleep hygiene

Next to calming your breathing, getting enough deep restorative sleep is the foundation to good mood. If we don't get enough sleep, stress can lead to depression.

- Stay off devices at least an hour before going to bed (as the blue light also effects melatonin, our sleep hormone). Other bright light at night can also affect circadian rhythms.
- Try to go to bed about the same time every night and get up the same time every morning regardless of weekends as the brain likes regularity.
- Use the bedroom for sleep and sex only
- Avoid caffeine 8 to 10 hours before going to bed. Even if you don't have an intolerance to caffeine, research suggests that it still effects the quality of your sleep.
- Avoid alcohol and sweet foods before bed.
- The bedroom should be cool and completely dark.
- To decrease your body temperature, have a warm bath or shower before bed.
- Get early morning sunlight and late afternoon sunlight as this helps your body know what time it is.

For the research on sleep go to www.hubermanlab.com

4. Correct Posture

When we are stressed or anxious, many muscles in our body contract to help prepare us for fighting or running or to bring the body inward to protect it from possible real or perceived danger. Correcting your posture helps to hinder this negative postural feedback loop.

- Imagine a hook in the sternum pulling the chest up and out (with the chest expanding and the shoulder blades squeezing close together)
- Put computers, laptops, reading material, etc. at an appropriate eye level so you do not need to slouch.
- Use a posture rehab device – This a large foam roller (you can source these from chiropractors or physios) placed along the length of the spine and up under the head. Laying on it for 10 to 15 minutes each day can help passively change your posture and open up the chest area.

5. Calf Pump

Under stress our calf muscles become tight and shorten to enable us to quickly flee or fight. This action also locks down the knees, lower back and decreases the natural flow of the cerebral spinal fluid around the brain.

Stand and support yourself with hands on a wall or back of chair. Place one leg behind the other and lean forward, bending the knee of the forward leg. Ensure that the straight leg and back are in one line.

6. Hamstring Stretches

These are other leg muscles that are associated with flight or fight response. Lie on the floor near a wall. Extending your leg up and away from your body. Place your heel on the wall and keep your knee extended. Just stretch as far as you can.

7. Control Light Input.

When we are in survival mode, we can become hyper sensitive to light and sound. It is the brain's way of trying to see and hear for danger.

- Wear a good pair of polarizing sunglasses

- Lessen the amount of time on devices that produce blue light signals i.e., TV, computer screens, iPad, smart phones, fluorescent lights. The signals from these are a short, sharp wave shape which amps up our nervous system.
- Use red lenses which filter out the blue signals and calm down the nervous system
- Use light dimmers at night
- Ensure the bedroom is completely black for sleeping or wear a mask

8. Dampen sound input

Use ear plugs or headphones to block out irritating noises.

9. Look at the Periphery.

a). If we are sympathetic dominant or in survival mode, over a long period of time our pupils constrict and we tend to have tunnel vision (not see the forest from the trees). Focusing on the periphery has a calming effect on the brain and body.

Stretch your hands out in front of you and slowly bring them to the side while you watch them with your eyes. You can do this at any time of the day without using your hands, just remind yourself to look at the periphery.

b). Hold something colourful in one hand about the size of a water bottle. Put both hands straight out in front at eye level with arms straight. As you look straight ahead, take your arms out to the side, being aware of looking at the periphery at the item you are holding. Then bring your arms back in front again at eye level, swapping the item into the other hand and take your arms back to the sides again, this time being aware of the item in the periphery on the other side. Do this many times while saying to yourself "I am safe".

10. Exercise

Regular cardiovascular exercise helps rid the body of the excess toxins and stress hormones.

However, if doing vigorous exercise, it is important to warm up and down as the build up of lactic acid irritates the nervous system, putting you into fight/flight.

Exercise can be simply going for a walk or dancing to your favourite music.

11. Progressive Relaxation.

If you're stuck in your car or at your desk or having trouble sleeping, practice progressive relaxation techniques. Tense, then release different muscles in a set sequence. It doesn't matter if you start from the top of your head and work your way down to your toes or starting from your toes and working your way up. Do these for 5 seconds each then relax

- Close eyes tightly then relax
- Clench jaw (not so tightly that your teeth hurt) then relax
- Slowly rotate your head in a circle to the left for three rotations. Rotate to the right for three rotations. Then relax
- Pull your shoulders up toward your ears then relax
- Pull your chin to your chest then relax
- Hold your arms out like you are pushing against a wall then relax
- Squeeze your fists then relax
- Tighten your stomach muscles then relax
- Tighten your thighs then relax
- Flex your calves then relax
- Curl toes to tighten then relax

12. Massage

Massage does more than just relax your muscles. It also releases endorphins that calm the peripheral nervous system. It also increases circulation and speeds up the removal of toxins from the body. Take time for yourself and book in for regular massages or ask your partner if you have one and if they are willing. Giving one to your partner can also be beneficial for you as well as them as it keeps you focussed in the present moment.

13. Ear Massage

An ear massage is a fantastic way to release endorphins in your brain and make you feel good. The beauty is that it only takes a few minutes. Start by gently rubbing your earlobes with your thumb and index finger. Then squeeze the outer edges of your ears all the way to the top. These parts of your ears have tiny reflex points that can relax specific areas of your body. Finish by using your index fingers and middle fingers to massage behind the ears on the bony part of your skull.

14. Healthy Eating

Stress compromises our digestive and immune system, so it is vitally important to eat a well-balanced diet, free of sugars and simple carbohydrates, caffeine and alcohol. Stress also impacts hydration, so it is important to drink plenty of good quality/filtered water.

If you have digestive issues get an IgG blood profile done which will test foods that you are sensitive to, take these out of your diet to allow your digestive system time to calm down and improve. See a naturopath or dietician to help with this. Also consult a naturopath about supplementation of vitamins, minerals or herbs.

15. Improve your Gut Health

There is now much evidence on the importance of good gut flora and how that impacts on our health and mood. 70% of serotonin (a feel-good hormone and also the precursor to melatonin, the sleep hormone) is actually made in the gut. Your gut may need more support than taking a probiotic supplement as the gut environment needs to be able to support these. You also may need help weeding out the non-beneficial gut flora. Naturopaths have good advice about this.

16. Spend time in Nature

Getting out into nature and feeling grounded is really important. Take some time and walk barefoot on the grass. This alone has a 62% effect on stress. Get out in the sunshine and get some important Vitamin D.

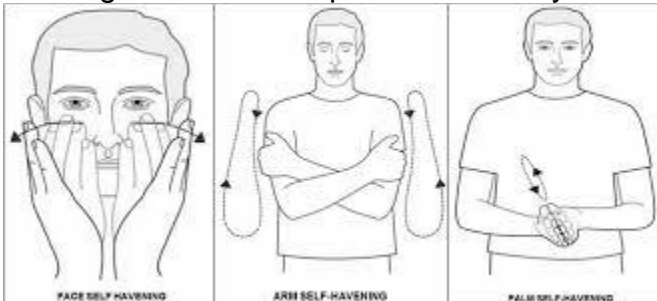
Spending 30 sec a day looking at the sun with **eyes closed** helps to promote sleep as well.

17. Bilateral stimulation – Butterfly Hugs

Bilateral stimulation has been proven to calm the nervous system. Cross your arms over your chest and slowly tap on each shoulder, one hand at a time. You can incorporate deep breathing with this while repeating the affirmation “I am safe”.

18. Havening

Rubbing areas of the body as shown below, while thinking of a relaxing place, helps produce calming hormones. Repeat these many times until you feel calmer.



For more information on Havening go to <https://www.havening.org>

19. Splash you face with cold water

Splashing your face with cold water initiates the mammalian diving reflex due to the brain and body's anticipation of preparing to dive into water and possibly needing to hold our breath underwater for a period of time. When this is triggered, it has a calming effect on our body as our

heart rate slows, blood is redirected to our core to protect critical organs and other oxygen conserving mechanisms come into play. Unfortunately, just getting part of your body wet and cold isn't enough to trigger this response. You need to hold your breath and let the cold water hit your face and enter the nostrils.

1. Run the water cold.
2. Take a deep breath and hold it.
3. Splash the cold water up towards your face, covering your whole face.
4. Still holding your breath, repeat splashing a few more times
5. Take a deep refreshing breath and pat your face dry.

Enjoy the sense of calm.

20. Body Patting

This is an old Qigong technique which can help with grounding and as it follows the natural flow of the meridian system giving you more energy.

Start with just gently bouncing with bent knees and continue this through the patting process.

- Pat on both sides of your stomach with open hands for about 30 to 40 times.
- With you left arm straight out in front of you and palm up, pat from your shoulder down to your hand and on your palm.
- With your palm now facing the floor, pat from your hand back up to your shoulder.
- Turn your arm so your thumb faces the ceiling, pat from your shoulder back down to your hand.
- Turn your hand so that your pinky faces the ceiling and pat from your hand back up to your arm.
- Pat inside your arm pit and down the side of your body to your hip.
- Repeat this process with your left arm.
- Pat your abdomen again for a few taps
- Put your hands around your back and tap on the location of your kidneys around your lower back a few times
- Continue patting onto your buttocks and all the way down the back of your legs.
- Pat the front of your feet and pat all the way to the top of your legs.
- Pat your thighs and continue to pat all the way down the outside of your legs.
- Pat the inside of your legs from the foot all the way to the top
- If you want to take it further, you can continue to tap (not pat) the beginnings and endings of the some of the meridians as displayed on the EFT section.
- End with a couple of deep breaths and gently shake your arms and legs.

Calming the Mind

Getting rid of ANTs (Automatic negative thoughts)

Emotions are caused by the thoughts that we have about a sensation we feel from an experience (trigger). The thoughts that we attribute to these triggers are based on our past experiences and the limiting beliefs we hold about ourselves Eg I will never be good enough; I will never find love. I am hopeless etc. These thoughts in turn create our emotions. Whether it is a good or negative emotion is purely based on our perception of the event or trigger. If you put 10 people in the same room and gave them the same experience, they would possibly have 10 different perceptions and 10 different emotional responses. Therefore, we can change our emotions by changing our thoughts. It is important to catch our thoughts as soon as we notice them and stop the pattern before it cascades into a loop of monkey chatter and puts us into survival mode or overwhelm (fight, flight, freeze). This takes lots of practice to be the master of our thoughts but the benefits are well worth the effort.

Work on Thinking Traps

When we are anxious the brain tends to get stuck on a tread mill worrying about the future or ruminating about the past. What it is trying to do is to work out all the scenarios that could possibly go wrong with the aim of coming up with solutions to keep us safe. Unfortunately, though, this has the opposite effect and keeps us in the fight/flight response, making us more anxious.

When overwhelmed or depressed, people tend to:

Internalise things as their fault rather than look at all reasons and possibilities

Over generalise/ global thinking

Think in black and white

Make mountains out of molehills (small challenges become huge)

Ruminate about the past

Worry about the future

Have unrealistic expectations (trying to control things they have no or little control over)

Some of these ideas may help

21. Positive Affirmations

Refute negative thoughts. (Are they logical). Replace negative thoughts with positive affirmations

Ask yourself

Can I see this as an opportunity to grow rather than a problem?

Am I taking this too personally?

Is there really a right answer?

It's not a perfect world.

Can I Let go, and let God (or any higher power)?

Am I over generalizing?

Am I trying to control myself or others?

Am I being myself?

Am I being gentle with myself?

Affirmations

This too shall pass.

Every day in every way I am better, better, better.

I am loved, loving and loveable

I am enough and everything I do is enough.

I am worth my weight in gold

It is safe for me to step out in the world

I am safe and secure in the world

22. Keep a Gratitude Journal.

Humans have a negativity bias designed to keep us safe, meaning we are more prone to look for the negative things in the environment as it was these things that could possibly harm us. When stressed or anxious we are even more likely to look for the negative. We need to retrain the brain to look for the more positive things in the day. **An attitude of gratitude** has proven to be extremely successful in increasing happiness and health.

Keep a journal and list two things a day you are grateful for and one thing you are looking forward to the next day.

23. Journaling

Spending time each day to write in a journal and evacuating thoughts, feelings and beliefs is a great way to untangle the mess in the mind and get to the root of the issues that may be contributing to your stress, anxiety or depression. This is for your eyes only and therefore should be a completely honest account of how you feel.

24. I Am Safe

As soon as anxious thoughts start coming to the surface, look around your environment and ask yourself "am I safe? Is there anything here that is out to kill me? (as that is what the mind and body is thinking) if the answer is yes you are safe, then tell this to your subconscious. Say "thank you subconscious. I know that you are trying to keep me safe by giving me these feelings and sensations, but right now I am safe you can calm down now". Remind yourself that this is your body helping you to rise to a challenge.

25. Facing Problems

Facing your problems and working out strategies to solving them is a major key to reducing stress, anxiety and depression

Make a to do list of your stresses. Break it up into three groups: Problems, Projects and People (people in your life that stress you out)

Divide a page in half with the headings: problems, projects or people up the top on one side and on the other side write solutions. For people it might be; talk to them or filter them out. Sometimes forgiveness is needed of yourself or others. Resentment can be a major source of stress. (it is like drinking arsenic and expecting the other person to die), no one wins. However, there might be some people you may not want to forgive and the most important thing is not to give yourself a hard time over it.

Check out the you tube by Matt Kahn on "the essence of forgiveness"

26. Have a worry time.

Set aside some time each day i.e., 5 minutes in which you allow yourself to worry. After that time, you focus on positive thoughts. If the negative thoughts begin to creep back in, remind yourself that you can worry again at the same time tomorrow.

Write down your worry stories and see if you can detect an underlying theme. E.g. "I am not good enough", "I am inadequate" "I am not in control".

27. Label what you are thinking

When your thoughts start looping (i.e. monkey brain) say to yourself out loud (or to yourself if not convenient). "This is me thinking about (state what you are thinking)". This helps bring you back into the present moment and breaks the looping. Repeat as needed.

28. Catch, Flick or Follow

Catch your negative thought before it starts spiralling and imagine flicking it away. Keep doing this until there are no more. If it is a positive thought catch and follow it.

29. 5 Second Rule

Counting from 5 backwards gives you time to make decisions more logically. You can use this anytime: before giving into a craving, needing motivation to do an activity or with negative thoughts or behaviours you want to change.

30. Distract yourself

When negative thoughts start to come in, distract your brain by doing something that needs your mental attention like following a menu, or making something where you need to follow directions.

Naming /counting

When the brain starts looping out of control and you feel yourself becoming stressed, start naming in your mind anything you can see in your environment. If it happens in the night start counting from 1 –9 and then start again. (if you try to count to or back from 100, just losing your place when you become unfocussed can also become stressful)

Senses 5 to 1

Take a deep breath and look around the environment. Notice:

5 things you can see

4 things you can hear

3 things you can touch

2 things you can smell

1 thing you can or could taste if it was immediately available to you (use your imagination here and try to remember the taste of that thing)

31. Anxious Reappraisal

Anxiety and excitement are both arousal states and share almost the same physiology, hormones and release of chemicals in the body. The difference is the emotions that accompany them.

Excitement is usually coupled with positive emotions and the attitude of something that is going to go well, where anxiety is coupled with negative emotions and the possibility that things will have an unhappy ending. When you feel those anxious feelings start to creep in, try telling yourself how excited you are and think of some possible positive outcomes to the situation you may be in. e.g., if you start feeling anxious in bed for no apparent reason, say to yourself “I am so excited about what new possibilities tomorrow will bring” you may even be able to list some of the things you are looking forward to.

32. Turn off the News

There are not many good news stories these days and the negative news stories just increase your fight/flight response vicariously. Bad things are going to happen whether you listen to them or not and unless you can personally control the plights of others, then don't allow the negativity to bring you down as well. The best you can do is to keep healthy and positive so you can make small differences in the lives of people close to you which has a ripple effect.

33. Surround yourself with humour

Be it funny movies, podcasts, books or humorous people.

34. Meditation

One or two daily sessions of meditation – preferably at the same time every day – will change the way your body responds to stress, because the effects of one session can last throughout the day. Just observe your breathing. Listen to the sound it makes and feel the sensation it creates. This leads you into a meditative state. If thoughts enter your mind, just let them go. Passively disregard them. Instead, stay with your breath. Let it settle into its own circular rhythm. There are many meditations on YouTube you can follow. I personally like Joe Dispenza or Tara Brach. Use other relaxation techniques such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong or Yoga.

Websites and meditation apps

www.headspace.com

<https://www.healthline.com/health/anxiety/top-iphone-android-apps>

35. Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness keeps you out of your head and in the present moment. There are many websites that can help you develop this practice,

36. EFT for Anxiety or stress

EFT which stands for Emotional Freedom Technique has become very popular in the last decade, even with many doctors and psychologists teaching it to their clients and getting great results.

There are many YouTube channels that you can learn this from, here is one link.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2m6VzsfKxng>

Basically, this is all you need to do.

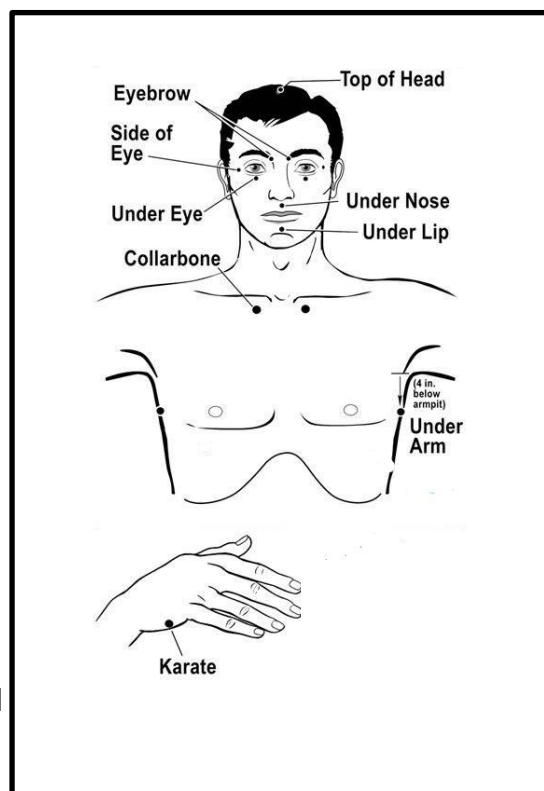
If you feel stressed or anxious, work out on a scale of 1 -10 how bad it feels.

Say the set-up statement and tap on all the points

Set up statement

“Even though I feel stressed or anxious, I deeply and completely, love and accept myself.” Say this a few times while tapping the karate point on your hand.

Then start tapping at the eyebrow working your way down, tapping on the head last while say how you are feeling, e.g. “I feel jittery”, “out of control thoughts”, “I feel frustrated”. What ever comes to mind. Research suggests



that it doesn't matter what you say, it is the tapping that is important.

Do this for a few repetitions.

Then state how you would like to feel but say it as if you are feeling it now. I.e., "I'm feeling calm", "relaxed", "in control".

Check to see how you now feel on a scale of 1- 10. Keep doing this until you feel calmer.

Because you are tapping on the meridian points, this helps calm your body and you are also affirming that maybe you are not running away from the tiger if you have time to stop and tap.

37. Sedona Method

Sedona method is a great method to learn how to let go of unwanted emotions or issues in your life that don't serve you. You can do this method when you feel triggered by an emotion or if there is an issue you know you want to work on.

Ask yourself

1. Do I choose to let this go? If so ask
 2. Could I let it go?
 3. Would I let it go? (Are you willing to, would you prefer to hold onto it or be free of it?)
 4. When? (An invitation to decide to let it go now)
 5. In that moment just welcome how you feel, let the emotion sit with you, really feel it
 6. Welcome that it has nothing to do with you, it is just an emotion, it doesn't define you. Emotions are just energy, they don't have Velcro, they can not stick unless you let them.
 7. Expand that space within
 8. Continue the process until you feel better. A particular issue can contain many emotions.
- Below is a link to more information

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CADTkM1aoP8>

38. Spend time with family or other support networks where you can share your feelings.

Connecting with trusted others is one of the most important things you can do to help increase your mood. This helps increase our oxytocin (bonding hormone) levels and makes us feel connected and not alone.

39. Acupressure Points

Holding specific acupressure points (points on the meridians used in acupuncture) can also bring a sense of calm to the body.

Heart 7

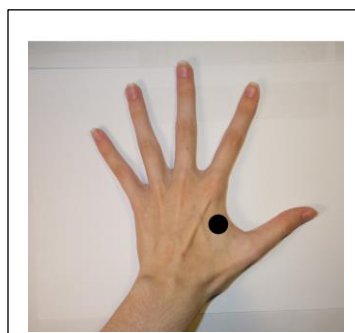
This point sits on the inside of your wrist just below where your hand and wrist meet in a direct line down from the valley, where your little finger and ring finger meet.

Massage this spot for about a minute regularly throughout the day. Massage both sides.



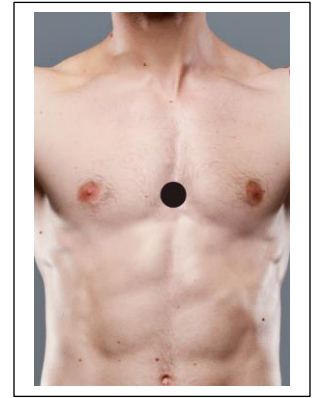
Large Intestine 4

While this point is primarily used for pain, it can also have a calming effect especially if pain is a primary cause of your stress. This point is found on the outside of your hand on the webbing between the thumb and pointer finger. The actual point is not on the webbing itself but closer to the bone, it may feel quite sensitive. Using your thumb from the other hand, press and massage in a small circular motion for 30sec to a minute. Do multiple times a day.



Central Vessel 17

This acupuncture point is reportedly good for anxiety, panic attack and heart palpitations. Found on the sternum (breast bone) in the hollow between the nipples. Use two fingers to either press on this point or gently massage with small circular motions for 2 to 3 minutes.



Heart Self Points

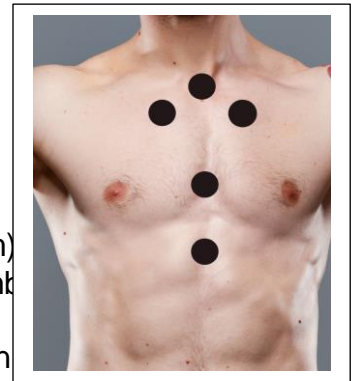
Holding a certain combination of acupressure points can bring a feeling of calm. These points are Central Vessels 14 (located directly under the xiphoid process which is at the lower end of the breastbone).

Central Vessel 18 (located on the sternum or breast bone, two finger widths up from CV17 which is located between the nipples)

Central Vessel 22 (on the hollow just under the neck)

Kidney 21 (soft tissue under the clavicle to the left and right of the sternum)

Using middle and pointer fingers from one hand hold CV22, with the thumb and ring finger holding K27. Using pinkie and ring finger on other hand hold CV 14 and thumb on CV18. Hold for 2 -3 minutes while deep breathing



Hook-ups

Hook- ups come from Paul Dennison as part of the Brain Gym program.

These points connect particular meridians in the body, helping to reorganise and rebalance the energy flow. Allowing the mind and body to relax as energy circulates through areas of blocked tension.

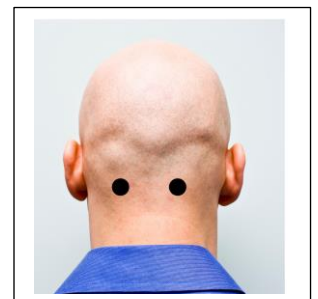
- Sitting, cross the left ankle over the right.
- Extend arms out in front, crossing the left wrist over right
- Interlace fingers and draw hands up toward chest
- Close eyes and breathe deeply and relax



Back of the Head

Gallbladder 20 (located at the back of the head at the base of the skull on the occipital ridge.) Use your thumbs to gently massage these points for 1 -2 minutes (they can get quite sensitive) This is helpful for tension headaches and relieving stressed neck and shoulder muscles.

Alternatively, place two tennis balls into a stocking or sock, tie the end and put this at the base of the skull with the balls on both sides of the skull as you lay on the floor or massage table.



40. Learn Tension Releasing Exercises.

Go to my website for information about this technique which helps calm your nervous system. By stretching the muscles that are used in the survival response, these exercises then allow the body to tremor or shake in a way that brings it back to balance.

www.1bodytherapies.com.au

41. Sensory activities

Using sensory toys such as playdough, kinetic sand, clay or stress ball can be calming and bring you back to the present moment.

42. Get Creative

Find a way that you like to be creative, this can be so different for everybody. For some it is painting, clay, writing, wood work, gardening, lead light, craft. Allow this to be process rather than product orientated which could have the opposite effect, just allow yourself to go with the flow. Allocate a period of time each day to be involved in a creative pursuit or at the very least once a week. Being creative brings you back to the present moment, connecting you with a flow state and helps produce positive endorphins and hormones.

Others

Listen to soothing music

Drink Camomile tea or other soothing tea blends

Take regular baths in Epsom Salts (excess adrenaline depletes magnesium)

Use aromatherapy oils such as lavender which has a very calming effect

Go on a holiday. Even if you can not go on one, it is fun to plan.

Do a vision board. Put on it all the things you would like to achieve in the future. Use the power of your imagination to envision what you want in your life.