The Pocket Guide for Students: Mindfulness and Mental Health Guide

## Time-outs for stress management

* Quick and easy access for when you don’t have a lot of time or space
  + Make a cup of tea
  + Arrange to meet a friend for coffee or call a friend to chat
  + Go for a walk
  + Cuddle a pet if you have one
  + Have a bath
  + Sit quietly and do nothing for a short while (put your phone down and actually do nothing – turn your phone off if that helps).
  + Tidy up and have a sort out (decluttering is good for clearing the mind)
  + Favourite songs
    - Kitchen disco is always a good option for relieving stress and tension. Get your flatmates and children/family to join in!
  + Write in a journal/diary and try meditative reflective writing
* Physical and mental wellbeing
  + Try a guided meditation
    - There are lots of meditation apps and videos online for free
  + Yoga
    - Sign up for a class, go with a friend or alone
    - There are lots of free videos online
    - Look for apps available
  + Go for a run or bike ride
  + Join a sports club/group or exercise class
* Creative stress relief
  + Learn to bake something
    - For example, baking bread is great for working out some stress while you’re kneading the dough
  + Get creative and learn a new skill, such as glass painting or knitting
    - Active mindfulness comes from engaging in something that requires concentration, and this can provide a focus for reducing tension and stress
  + Play, or learn to play, an instrument (if you have the space and resources to accomplish this). Playing an instrument is a great work-out for the brain, and learning an instrument has huge cognitive benefits that can help you concentrate and learn.
    - Schedule regular practice sessions in if you already play
    - If you have the resources, take up lessons in an instrument you’ve always wanted to play
  + Play a game or a computer game
    - Just don’t get so distracted that you forget about all the other things you need to do.

## The 5,4,3,2,1 Technique

This technique is something of a ‘mind hack’, it distracts your mind enough so that you can ground yourself in the present and get some psychological ‘space’ from your worries, giving you some control over your thinking.

You need to find a series of things in your immediate environment that you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. If you mix up the order, that doesn’t matter, it’s the nature of the exercise that is important.

For example, if I do this right now, I can do the following:

1. **5 things I see**
   * My laptop
   * A cup of tea
   * Flowers on the windowsill
   * A bookcase
   * The cat walking out of the room in disgust that I’m writing instead of giving her my undivided attention!
2. **4 things I can hear**
   * The sound of the keys on the laptop as I type
   * The music I’ve got on in the background
   * The wind outside
   * The sound of my breathing
3. **3 things I can touch**
   * The laptop
   * The chair I’m sitting on
   * The cup of tea
4. **2 things I can smell**
   * The flowers on the windowsill
   * The cup of tea
5. **1 thing I can taste**
   * A perfect cup of tea

It really works, despite all the other things I can see, such as a huge to-do list for my job, just thinking about and writing this list has helped me feel calmer.

## Square Breathing

This technique is used in many areas to help calm and quiet the mind and involves regulating your breathing and dealing with the physical elements of stress and anxiety, while also giving you something to focus on so you are distracted temporarily from the thoughts you are focused on. It is very similar to Kumbhaka Pranayama, a breathing technique found in Hatha yoga practice that is known to increase concentration, reduce perceived stress and physiological indicators of stress, and improve mood, as well as having a myriad of other benefits (Jayawardena et al, 2020).

Both square breathing, sometimes called ‘Box Breath’, and Kumbhaka Pranayama regulate this practice of pausing the breath and enabling the body to pause and focus on the solitary act of breathing instead of the myriad of other things that are potentially causing anxiety. The trick to this exercise is to not count too fast, the idea is to count seconds rather than count quickly, you’re aiming to slow down your breathing, and allow your body and mind to relax.

## Mindfulness exercises

Mindfulness is about focusing on the moment and engaging with the process rather than any specific end goal, putting aside worries and everyday stresses. The practice of mindfulness is about taking a small step out of life for a short while, to allow you to gain clarity and focus, and reduce your stress levels to enable you to cope with your life demands. Here are some of the common mindfulness exercises, but you can do anything mindfully, as long as you focus on the moment and leave other things to one side for a little while.

* Mindful walking/journey outside/explore your local area
  + Go for a walk around, or explore, your local area. Listen to the sounds, look at what is around you, focus on the experience of the journey and how it makes you feel. Bonus points if you manage to are able to explore a green or blue space (near a park, woods, a lake, or the sea). Green and blue spaces are great for increasing mental wellbeing.
* Mindfulness colouring books
  + There are many colouring books available, pick your favourite or download pictures from the internet, get some colouring pencils, then relax in a comfortable chair and colour in.
  + There are digital alternatives, and there are many mindfulness colouring apps available for use on a phone or tablet.

## Mental Health Support

* Mindfulness/meditation apps
  + There are many mindfulness apps around, with various themes. There are some that focus on sleep, some that focus on breathing, some that focus on meditation. Explore what is available and find one that works for you.
  + A couple of recommendations from Student Mind are:
    - Headspace
      * <https://www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app>
    - Breathe
      * Available through most app sources
* Meditation
  + Meditation is a great technique for managing stress, there is scientific evidence that shows it can reduce stress in many ways, including lowering blood pressure. Although it’s not for everyone, it’s worth giving it a try as it’s such an effective stress buster. There are many apps available, but equally, there are many videos on YouTube. If you’re new to meditation, try the short (5-15 minute) guided meditation videos and exercises first, then if you have more time and find it’s beneficial, work up to longer meditation exercises and videos.
* Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) apps
  + CBT is a great support mechanism for everyone, in particular those who do need that bit extra mental health support. There are a variety of apps available, and your university may even subscribe to one so you may have free (full) access, for example SilverCloud.
    - Look at the apps available
    - Check out if your university subscribes to any CBT-based programmes
* Mind is a UK national charity that supports those who have mental health challenges. The companion organisation, Student Mind is specialised in student-focused support. Both websites have a range of support resources available.
  + <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/>
  + <https://www.mind.org.uk/>
  + They have a free online community, Side by Side, that can help provide a source of support during those times when you need it most.
    - <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/side-by-side-our-online-community/>
* The NHS has some very supportive resources, along with contacts for local support groups for most situations you might be facing.
  + <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/nhs-voluntary-charity-services/nhs-services/>

## Nutrition tips for mood boosters

Nutrition is a key factor in keeping mind and body healthy, the better you eat, the more able you are to cope with the various challenges in your life. It’s often a challenge ensuring you have regular access to appropriate foods, and dietary restrictions can often play a part in what you can and can’t eat.

* Mind have some great tips for nutritional support, so you should check out the website for lots of useful tips and some great recipes.
  + <http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/about-food-and-mood>
  + [http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/the-mind-meal](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/food-and-mood/the-mind-meal/)

Of course, a balanced food intake is always the best option while you’re studying, but often when we are busy, we make short-cuts or reach for sugar-loaded carbohydrates that can negatively impact our mood and ability to concentrate. There is a huge amount of research into nutrition around, here is just a few tips to help target your daily intake towards foods that will help with your mental health in particular.

* Higher consumption of fruits and vegetables leads to being calmer, happier and more energetic (White et al, 2013).
  + Of course, there are many considerations relative to any medications you may be taking, for example grapefruit can’t be eaten with many medications as it can increase the side effects or change the effectiveness of the medication. Make sure you read the fine print of any medications you take and talk to your doctor if you’re planning on adding anything to your diet regularly.
* The following foods are particularly good at supporting healthy brain function:
  + Apples
  + Berries
  + Grapes
  + Onions
  + Tomatoes
  + All the greens (e.g., spinach, broccoli)
  + Beans
  + Green tea
  + Spices such as oregano, nutmeg, and cinnamon
  + Sesame, sunflower, or pumpkin seeds
* Things to avoid if you want to keep your brain healthy:
  + Aspartame (a common sweetener) has been shown to increase depression symptoms and irritability at a consistent dose that is just half the recommended amount (Lindseth et al, 2014 - 561).
    - Found in many ‘diet’ drinks, sweets, some sugar alternatives, even nutritional bars.
    - Always read the label!

## References

* Lindseth, G.N., Coolahan, S.E., Petros, T.V., Lindseth, P.D. (2014). Neurobehavioural effects of aspartame consumption, *Research in Nursing & Health*, 37(3), 185-193.
* White, B.A., Howarth, C.C., & Conner, T.S. (2013). Many apples a day keep the blues away-daily experiences of negative and positive affect and food consumption in young adults. *British Journal oh Health Psychology,* 18(4): 782-798