

May Activities

This is it – you’re going into battle. May is a time when you need to take care of yourself. Good sleep is important, good food is important, and space to reflect and calm yourself will work wonders too. There are only two activities this month. After all, your time will be spent in and out of the exam hall. But if you’re feeling the pressure, try our First Aid Kit for three simple activities that always help. Like all wellbeing stuff, the activities can look a little weird, particularly if you’re reading this in September. But set aside time to try them – they’ve worked extremely well for others. You could be the same.

39. Attitude Activity: The First Aid Kit – Three Exercises to Dissolve Stress

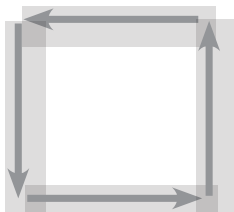
Box Breathing

(Time: 1–2 minutes)

For this exercise, you need to take four breaths, and as you do so, imagine building a box. Try this once or twice a day, and over a short period you’ll begin to feel calmer.

Breath 3: In through the nose,
4 seconds, then hold for 4 seconds.

Breath 4: Out through the slightly
open mouth across 4 seconds,
then hold for 4 seconds when
empty. Get back to your day!



Breath 2: Out through the slightly
open mouth across 4 seconds, then
hold for 4 seconds when empty.

Breath 1: In through the nose,
4 seconds, then hold for 4 seconds.

Breath 1: Breathe in through the nose until the lungs are full and the chest is expanded. Take four seconds to fill your lungs. If you want a word in your head to help clear thoughts, the word can be ‘right’ as you imagine a pen travelling rightwards as it draws the bottom line of the box. Once you’re full, hold the breath for four seconds.

Breath 2: Breathe out through the slightly open mouth. Take four seconds to totally empty your lungs. The word ‘up’ can be mentally repeated here if you need, as you imagine a line being drawn up to make the right-hand side of the box. When you’re totally empty, hold for four seconds.

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Breath 3: Breathe in through the nose until the lungs are full and the chest is expanded. Take four seconds to fill your lungs. If you want a word in your head to help clear thoughts, the word can be 'left' as you imagine a pen travelling leftwards across the top line of the box. Once you're full, hold the breath for four seconds.

Breath 4: Breathe out through the slightly open mouth. Take four seconds to totally empty your lungs. The word 'down' can be mentally repeated here if you need, as you imagine a line being drawn down to complete the box. When you're totally empty, hold for four seconds. You're done!

Deliberate Kindness

(Time: 30 seconds – 1 minute)

Suggested by a leader at Google, this deliberate kindness exercise takes very little time, but when repeated it has hugely positive effects. Because stress or anxiety is a focus on the self, activities like this work because they require you to place your focus on others.

Version 1

- » Choose three people – parents, friends, peers, tutors or teachers, brothers, sisters or cousins.
- » Give each of them ten seconds of your time, bringing them to mind, one at a time, as vividly as you can. Mentally say: 'I wish for this person to be happy.' Imagine them happy. Repeat the phrase mentally if you need to for ten seconds.
- » Repeat for your three people. That's it.

Version 2

Try this in a public place – a study room, library, cafe, bus station, watching a crowd through a window somewhere.

- » Cast your eyes over the crowds around you and choose three random people.
- » Give each of them ten seconds of your time, one at a time, as vividly as you can. Mentally say: 'I wish for this person to be happy.' Imagine them happy. Repeat the phrase mentally if you need to for ten seconds.
- » Do it for three people. You're done.

When repeated, this exercise trains your brain to spend just a little time focusing on others. Writer, teacher and entrepreneur Tim Ferriss says the following in his book *Tools of Titans* (2017, p. 159): 'I tend to do a single 3- to 5-minute session at night, thinking of three people I want to be happy, often two current friends and one old friend I haven't seen in years. A mere three days into doing this ... I found myself wondering throughout the day "Why am I so happy?" ... you easily get caught in the whirlpool of thinking about your "stuff". This loving-kindness drill takes the focus off you entirely – which, for me, immediately resolves at least 90% of the mental chatter.'

Concern vs. Control

(Time: 10 minutes)

This activity, adapted from Stephen Covey's excellent book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), asks you spend five minutes or so listing the things that are taking up your mental space and energy. Here's what you do:

1. Listen to your anxieties and worries (your 'mental chatter' as Tim Ferriss calls it) and write it all down – for example, 'worrying about the news', 'worrying about what questions might appear on my next exam', 'stressing about what people might think of my recent post on social media', 'thinking about ice cream'.
2. Put them in all in one big circle, so they look like they're all jostling around in your head. Now draw a second circle, off to the right or left, away from your head.
3. Next, review every item in the circle that looks like your head, crowded with crazy thoughts and issues, one at a time. For each item, ask yourself, 'What control do I have over this?'
4. If there's something you can do to control the outcome of the worry, it stays in the first circle (your head). Label this circle 'control'. If there's little or nothing you can do to control the outcome of the thought or worry, it leaves your head and goes to the second circle. This is going to be called 'concern' – the things you think about but have little or no influence over.

People who handle stress well minimise the stuff in the 'concern' circle. They practise forgetting about it. They spend their energy on the things in the 'control' circle and make plans. Finish the exercise by deciding *one simple thing* you could do to improve each of the issues/situations in your circle of control.

Final Thoughts

Feeling anxious or stressed about study is often a matter of perspective – about shifting your focus away from the self towards something else. That's why anything that makes you feel small or insignificant helps clear your head. If you're interested, here's two ways to do it:

The outdoors

We've spoken to pupils who have walked to the top of a hill near their house. From the top, the hugeness of the world makes them feel tiny. And that helps make them feel better. ("My problems seem stupid and small," one pupil told us.) Another, looking out across the whole city, realised that there were others with much bigger troubles than they had.

The night sky

Another way to help realise the smallness of your life on this planet is to gaze at the star-filled sky. Again, all of a sudden, an issue with a GCSE test seems tiny in comparison to the vastness of the universe. And that can help you re-gain perspective.