

Self-Help Exercises

Lebanon Relief Network put together some exercises that might help with presentations of traumatic stress. We have divided the exercises in five categories:

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There is no specific order to approach the categories or the exercises within them; also, you can practice as many exercises as you want.

Our advice is to find the exercises that best resonate with you, and practice those.

Guided Breathing Exercises

Your breath is a powerful tool to relieve stress and help you feel less anxious. Breathing calms you down and regulates your emotions. It has short term and long term effects on stress. In the short term, it slows your pulse down and gives you some sense of control. In the long term, it lowers basic stress levels and equilibrates your O₂ and CO₂. By practicing some breathing techniques, you can train yourself to reduce your levels of stress and anxiety.

Tip: Breathing exercises are a skill. The more you practice the better you get.

Exercise 1: Deep breathing

This exercise focuses on breathing and teaches you how to take deep breaths.

How to practice it

Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable.

1. Put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest.
2. Focus on inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. Let your belly push your hand out when you inhale. Try not to move your chest.
3. Now take a deep breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
4. Hold your breath whilst counting to 7.
5. Breathe out as you count to 8. Empty your lungs completely.
6. Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm.
7. Take a few moments to reflect on how you feel.

Exercise 2: Breath focus

The breath focus technique is similar to deep breathing. However, in addition to deep breathing, you should picture a pleasant image in your mind, along with a word or phrase that will help you feel more relaxed.

How to practice it

1. Close your eyes and take a few big, deep breaths.
2. Inhale through your nose. As you do that, imagine that the air is filled with a sense of calm and peace. Try to feel the peaceful air throughout your body. Think of a word or phrase as you inhale. As you breathe in, say in your mind something positive: for example, "I breathe in peace and calm."

3. Then exhale. Whilst you're doing that, imagine that the air leaving your body is taking your stress and tension with it. Use a word or phrase as you exhale. As you breathe out, say in your mind something positive: for example, "I breathe out stress and tension."
4. Continue this exercise for 10 to 20 minutes.

Exercise 3: Equal time for breathing in and breathing out

This exercise focuses on matching the time spent inhaling with the time spent exhaling. Over time, you'll be able to increase the length of time with which you breathe in and out. This will make you more aware of your breathing, and will allow you to leverage this technique when you need to regulate your anxiety.

How to practice it

Be comfortable. Sit on a chair or lie down on the floor.

1. Breathe in through your nose. As you do that, count to 5.
2. Breathe out through your nose. As you do that, also count to 5.
3. Repeat this process several times.
4. Once you feel comfortable with breaths that last five counts, increase how long you breathe in and breathe out. You can work up to breaths that last up to 10 counts, depending on how comfortable and relaxed you feel.

Exercise 4: Progressive muscle relaxation

This exercise helps you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups. The exercise can make you more aware of physical sensations, and allow you to focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation.

How to practice it

Lie comfortably and take a few deep breaths to relax.

1. Start by inhaling while tensing the muscles of your feet for 5 to 10 seconds.
2. Then exhale and release the tension in your feet.
3. Relax for 10 to 20 seconds, then move on to a different muscle group: for example, your calf muscles, your buttocks, your upper thighs, etc.
4. When releasing the tension, try to focus on the changes you feel whilst the muscle group is relaxing. Try imagining that stressful feelings are flowing out of your body as you relax each muscle group.
5. Gradually work your way up the body, as you contract and tense, and then relax each muscle group. You can start from your lower body and get all the way to the top: feet, legs, belly, chest, fingers, arms, shoulders, neck, and face.

Grounding Exercises

Grounding techniques help you connect with the present, as well as with the environment around you. These exercises often involve the use of all five senses: touch, smell, sight, taste, and hearing. As well as helping you stay connected to the present moment, grounding exercises reduce the likelihood of experiencing flashbacks or episodes of dissociation. These techniques are presented in no particular order: you can choose the one that you feel more comfortable doing and exercise it at your own pace.

Tip: Practice these exercises when you are calm first: in this way, you'll find them easier when you are distressed.

Exercise 1: The 5-4-3-2-1 technique

This technique involves intently taking in the details of your environment by using each of your five senses. The purpose of this grounding exercise is to notice the small things around you which your mind usually tunes out, while helping you stay grounded to the present.

How to practice it

Sit down, put your feet on the floor, take deep breaths, relax your shoulders, and ask yourself the following questions. Answer out loud, as it helps increase your awareness and stay focused.

1. What are **5 things** that you can see?
Look for small details, such as a pattern on the ceiling, the wall, the way light reflects off a surface, or an object you hardly notice.
2. What are the **4 things** that you can feel?
Notice the sensation of clothing on your body, different points of contact between you and wherever you are sitting, your feet on the ground, or the sun on your skin. Pick up an object around you and examine its texture, weight and other physical qualities.
3. What are the **3 things** that you can hear?
Pay attention to the sounds your mind has tuned out, such as a ticking clock, distant traffic, or trees blowing in the wind. Try to concentrate on those sounds only.
4. What are the **2 things** that you can smell?
Notice the smells in the air around you, like freshly mowed grass, an air freshener, or look around for something that has a scent that you may be able to smell: such as flowers, or unlit candles.

5. What is **1 thing** that you can taste?

Find gum, candy, or small snacks. Pop one in your mouth and focus your attention on the flavors and the sensation of the food's taste.

Exercise 2: Body awareness exercise

This exercise will bring you back into the *here and now*, by shifting your focus to sensations in the body. You will have to pay special attention to the physical sensations created in each step of the exercise.

How to practice it

1. Take 5 long, deep breaths through your nose, and exhale through puckered lips.
2. Place both of your feet, flat, on the floor. Start wiggling your toes, then curl and uncurl them several times. Spend a moment noticing the sensations in your feet.
3. Stomp your feet on the ground several times. Pay attention to the sensations in your feet and legs as you make contact with the ground.
4. Clench your hands into fists, then release the tension. Repeat this 10 times.
5. Press your palms together. Press them harder and hold this pose for 15 seconds. Focus your attention on the feeling of tension in your hands and arms.
6. Rub your palms together briskly. Pay attention to the sound and the feeling of warmth.
7. Extend your hands over your head, as if you were trying to reach the sky. Stretch like this for 5 seconds. Bring your arms down and let them relax.
8. Take 5 more deep breaths and notice the feeling of calm in your body.

Exercise 3: Visual awareness

This exercise focuses your attention on what you see. This can help when you are in stressful situations. For this exercise you will need an item: it can be anything that you can hold in one hand: a mug, a rock, a jewel, or even a necklace.

How to practice it

1. Hold the object in your hand and bring your full focus onto it.
2. Focus on the patterns that run through it: pay attention to the color variances.
3. Notice any color difference or sparkly bit.
4. Look at where shadows may fall on parts of it, or if some shapes or forms are different on one side.
5. Feel how heavy or light it is in your hand, and what the surface texture feels like under your fingertips.

Expressive Therapy

When a traumatic event occurs, whilst you are often not able to fully process it, you are able to *express* it in other forms. The act of writing, drawing, or painting helps you organize your thoughts and regulate your emotions; these acts can also help you make sense of the traumatic event.

Tip: It can be hard to put your mind to these activities, as you might fear that someone else will see or read what you have to express. Remind yourself that these projects are yours and are for your eyes alone.

Exercise 1: Journaling

Journaling means writing about your experience. Journaling can be very helpful, as writing, by itself, is an outlet for your emotions and feelings, which can leave you relaxed and unwinded. You can use any form, language, and pronouns you wish.

How to practice it

Find a comfortable space.

1. Grab a pen and a paper, or any device allowing you to write, and write anything that comes to mind. Don't really think about it: let your brain wander.
2. Time yourself, try it for a few minutes, and add a minute or two the next day.
3. When you start to feel comfortable with the act of writing, try focusing your writing on the traumatic event.
4. Include any detail you remember, along with the emotions and feelings that came with them.
5. Write any lesson that you learnt: the good and the bad stuff behind them, along with how you are currently feeling.
6. Try doing this for 4 days. If it makes you feel better, continue for as long as you need. If you see no changes, perhaps try another activity.

Exercise 2: The lighthouse activity

This activity is used along with arts and crafts material to help those who feel lost, overwhelmed, or isolated. It can help you get acquainted with your feelings, and visualize your needs for the future by embarking on a specific journey.

How to practice it

1. Gather some arts and crafts material, such as: ribbons, tape, crayons, coloured carton, paper...
2. Take a few deep breaths and give yourself a minute to clear your mind.

3. Acknowledge any feeling you may experience and remind yourself that what you are feeling is normal, and that you will get through it.
4. Imagine you have been out on a boat on a clear day, but as the day progressed, the weather took a turn for the worst. The sky has darkened, the sea is black and choppy. It is cold, and water is flowing into the boat. You have lost your way, and are unsure of how you will find your way back again. But, in the distance, you see a light – it is a lighthouse showing you the way to safety. You must head towards the lighthouse.
5. Take a moment to come back to the present, and with the material you have gathered, draw, color or paint a lighthouse. Depict yourself in relation to the lighthouse somewhere in the image, and add words that represent sources of guidance in your life. This is your work, the words can be added anywhere on your masterpiece!

Exercise 3: Postcard

This activity requires a card and some crayons. It can be an actual postcard, or just a regular piece of paper. Choose something that makes you happy. The purpose of this activity is to create a postcard to a person or about an event that has happened, and include emotions that you feel are weighing you down. This postcard is not meant to be sent out, but just to be used to unleash your emotions. In doing so, you will alleviate some stress, and will be able to visualize the root cause of your feelings.

How to practice it

1. Gather some arts and crafts material, such as: ribbons, tape, crayons, coloured carton, paper...
2. Get your card and tell yourself that all of your feelings will be portrayed on this card. That is okay: it is for your eyes only.
3. Start thinking about how you feel.
4. Start thinking about why you feel that way.
5. Write, draw, or jot on the postcard your feelings, and what you perceive as the reasons behind them.
6. Take a moment to review your card: it should include everything that you are feeling: both good and bad.
7. When you feel ready, read the postcard.
8. Acknowledge how you feel.
9. You can repeat this activity daily, until you feel like the weight has been lifted, and if you are not happy with your card, you can always have a make over and come up with something new.

Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness allows you to calm yourself, increase your awareness of your behaviors and bodily sensations, as well as thoughts and behaviors. Mindfulness can decrease your stress and anxiety by helping you understand and acknowledge the different thoughts that come to mind without indulging in them. This allows you to stay focused on your present task.

Tip: Don't worry if your mind wanders and you find it hard to focus. It is normal for your mind to get distracted, when you notice this, gently bring back your attention to the exercise. Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise.

Exercise 1: The raisin exercise

This is a known exercise for beginners that want to start practicing mindfulness. Although most people do it with a raisin, this exercise can be done with any type of food. Try to choose a food that has an interesting taste, smell, or texture.

How to practice it

Pretend it is the first time you see a raisin (or any other food you have chosen for the exercise).

1. Pay careful attention to the following aspects: the way the raisin looks, how it feels, how your skin responds to its manipulation and texture, its smell.
2. You can bring your mind to the present by taking the time to focus on what is in front of you, as well as notice everything about the raisin.
3. It is normal for your mind to wander, and for you to get distracted. Gently guide your focus back to the exercise when you feel your attention is decreasing.

Exercise 2: The mindful minute

The mindful minute is a quick and easy exercise which can be done anytime and anywhere. It can take as little as five minutes, and you can repeat it as much as you want during the same day.

How to practice it

Sit comfortably on a chair or lie down on the floor.

1. Start the mindful exercise by focusing on your breathing, and the physical sensations of each breath. For example, pay attention to how the air is moving in your lungs, how you are feeling it, or how your muscles are operating. Counting helps maintain consistency in the timing and flow of your breath

cycle. You can inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds, take 4 seconds to pause and hold, and begin again.

2. Once you feel you are in the present moment, evaluate the situation, and try to understand your current mood: depressed, irritable, worried, etc. Moreover, scan your body from head to toe looking for physical symptoms or sensations related to your actual mood, such as muscle pain or stomach burn.
3. Continue to acknowledge your state of mind and your mood: try to accept the current reality without trying to change something. Continue to be aware, moment by moment, while relaxing your muscles. You can end this mindful exercise by simply bringing your attention back to your environment and surroundings.

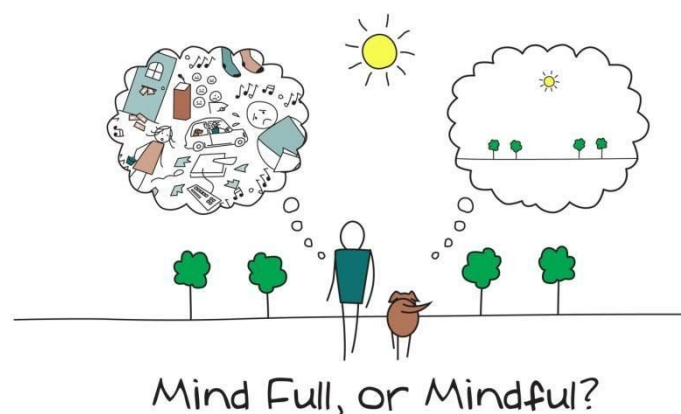
Exercise 3: Mindful listening

Human beings naturally thrive feeling “heard” and “seen”. This exercise is designed to offer a break from focusing on yourself. It aims at creating an inner stillness, free from any distractions, whether preconceived or judgmental.

How to practice it

Get comfortable.

1. Think of a situation that has stressed you in the past, and then think of a situation that you look forward to.
2. Narrate both situations out loud. As you do so, notice how you speak, and how you feel when you are speaking.
3. Observe your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations while you are narrating the two different scenarios.
4. Talk out loud about your observations. Here are some guiding questions:
 - a. How did I feel while narrating?
 - b. Did I notice my mind wandering?
 - c. Did I judge myself?
 - d. How did my body feel?
 - e. Would I share my stories with others? If yes, maybe try this exercise with someone.



Managing Emotions

Everyone experiences emotions. But, sometimes, people do not want to face them. So they suppress them, focus away from them, or avoid them. However, that doesn't always work. What you might not know is that the repeated attempt to avoid your emotions can increase your stress levels, disrupt your sleep, and impact your physical and mental health.

Tip: It is okay if you are unable to focus on these tasks at first. You can start with a single task, and then come back the next day for another task, and every other day after that. Take it gradually, and try working your way up to completing one full exercise before trying the next.

Exercise 1: Acceptance

The act of accepting emotions that you would rather not feel is key to letting go of them. When you accept those emotions, you stop avoiding them, or running away from them. Once you pass this step, you can start facing your emotions, and realize that they weren't as tough of an obstacle as we thought they would be.

How to practice it

Notice your emotions, acknowledge their existence, and untangle yourself from them. For example: if you notice that you are frustrated, with your inner voice say "I am frustrated, I am accepting that I am frustrated, I am taking a breath."

1. Try thinking of an emotion as a wave, coming and going. Try to notice how your body responds to it. Visualizing or picturing it may be helpful.
2. Recognize that you are not the emotion, but that the emotion is merely a passing cloud in the sky.
3. It is up to you to decide what to do with the emotion: having it on your mind does not mean that you must identify with it or act on it. You can try sitting with the emotion, and evaluate what next step is best for you.
4. With time, this thought process will reinforce your control over your emotions. Try practicing it once a day and with different emotions.

Exercise 2: STOPP

This exercise helps you when you are having a moment of intense emotions. It helps you address and manage your emotional response to the situation at hand.

How to practice it

1. S – Stop!
When the moment is peaking, stop, and pause for a second.
2. T – Take a breath
Focus on your breathing, notice how you breathe in and out.
3. O – Observe
 - What thoughts are going through your mind?
 - What are you focusing your attention on?
 - What are you reacting to?
 - What sensations do you notice in your body?
4. P – Pull back, and try to add some perspective
 - What is the bigger picture?
 - What is another way of looking at the situation?
 - What would a friend say to you, right now?
 - How accurate is the information you have: is it a fact or just an opinion?
 - Is there a more reasonable explanation?
 - How important is this? How important will it be in six months?
5. P – Practice what works: make a decision
 - What is the best thing for you to do right now?
 - What is the best thing for you to do for others right now?
 - What can you do that would help you abide by your thought process?
 - How can you respond in an effective and appropriate manner?

Try repeating this until you get a better grasp of your emotions

Exercise 3: Mood journal

Write down your feelings and the responses they trigger. With time, you may recognize a pattern of behaviour, and maybe notice the triggers that make you feel, and act in a certain way. Writing is effective because, when you read something that you have already written on paper, it is easier to see a clear pattern of behavior.

How to practice it

Get a journal of your liking. It can be paper based, or your notes app on your phone or tablet, or even a Word document. Anything which allows you to write should do the trick.

1. Try writing daily about your feelings, thoughts and behaviour. This can help you understand your behaviour in the long run.
2. When you are ready, read what you wrote, and try to analyze your behavior, your thoughts, and feelings. Can you see a pattern, or a connection?

3. It will take time to be able to understand your behaviour, and you might need to repeat the previous steps multiple times before making any connection. But once you understand your behaviour, try linking the pattern you have spotted to a specific thought or behaviour. Try to pinpoint as many connections as you can.
4. Once the connections are clear, try working on how you are going to manage yourself, should this behaviour occur again. What would you do differently? How would you react?
5. If the situation repeats itself, refer back to this journal and evaluate your outcome.