

Coping Skills

A Guide to Improving
Emotion Regulation, Grounding,
and Cognitive Flexibility



Created by Jennifer Shub
Psychology Doctoral Intern 2022-2023
UHCL Counseling and Mental Health Center
Connect • Empower • Thrive

If you are experiencing a life threatening event, please put this book down and call 911 or local law enforcement.



Suicide Lifeline: 988

Counseling and Mental Health Center: 281-
283-2580; #2

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Introduction

Hello! My name is Jennifer Shub and I am a doctoral intern at UHCL Counseling and Mental Health Center for the 2022-2023 year.

The pages of this booklet are filled with various exercises and scripts to help you when you are feeling flooded with emotions, experiencing a bout of panic, or just need to reconnect with the present. It is recommended to practice these techniques in a quiet and peaceful place with limited distractions. It is also recommended to practice these techniques when you are feeling calm and unprovoked, as you will become more adept at using them for when you do really need them.

In the case of an actual medical emergency (cardiovascular event, allergic reaction, stroke, injury, etc.) please dial 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. Feel free to take this book with you to help to cope with the event or lend to anyone who may need it! In similar fashion, if you are seriously considering ending your life, please call 988 or reach out to trusted friend/family member to talk it out. You may also call 281-283-2580 and press 2 to connect to a crisis hotline, or visit our office during our working hours (8am-5pm M-F).

Lastly, the Counseling and Mental Health Center [webpage](#) has an abundance of tools and resources that may be helpful in developing skills and monitoring symptoms. On the webpage we have links to mindfulness audio guides, videos to learn skills, and a variety of Self-Help handouts. More so, in the office there is a library of books available for check out as well as the Mind Spa.

Elements of Wellbeing

There are some basic tenants that make up “well-being.” Each are mutually co-dependent, meaning they are important on an individual basis and also affect each other. While there are infinite dimensions, most definitions of wellbeing include: emotional, physical, occupational, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and financial. The current tool is intended to improve function in most of the dimensions, making it a versatile resource.

As indicated above, not all dimensions of wellness are addressed in this resource. The purpose of this page is to acknowledge and emphasize the importance of attending to diet, exercise, and sleep—primarily elements of the physical dimension. An abundance of research has confirmed the relationship between all the factors and wellbeing (Wickham, Amarasekara, Bartonicek, & Connor, 2020).

Maintaining routines and boundaries related to sleep, diet, and movement can increase overall wellbeing, reduce distress, and increase resilience against mental and physical illness (Dale, Brassington, King, 2014; Fox 1999).



Elements of Wellbeing

Routines and boundaries related to sleep that can be beneficial include going to bed and waking up around the same time every day and limiting the use of blue-light emitting electronics close to bedtime. With regards to diet, being conscious of micro and macro nutrient contents, processed sugars and oils, and drinking an adequate amount of water are the basic factors to pay attention to. Beyond that, limiting caffeine can prevent other health complications. Lastly, maintaining a regular movement routine is important to keep the body working as it should and has a myriad of other health benefits. For instance, in a meta-analysis comparing regular movement with antidepressants, Netz (2017) found that the effectiveness of reducing depressive symptoms were about the same for many of the published studies.

While maintaining these boundaries and routines will not guarantee achievement of “wellbeing,” they are important to consider and attend to. The journey to wellness is not the exact same for everyone, but attending to these elements are key to general health.



What is Mindfulness, Why Does it Matter?

In essence, mindfulness means awareness. It means being fully engaged and aware of what you're doing, thinking, and feeling in the present moment—all without judgement or negative thoughts. Although it may sound easy, it is a very difficult thing to accomplish! It takes lots of patience and practice, but will overall have lasting benefits. In practicing mindfulness, one may increase their ability to cope, appreciate more things, and regulate emotions.

Mindfulness is a means of acknowledging where you are, what you need, and accepting and appreciating the moment you're

MINDFULNESS MOMENT TIME!!!



in. The aim is not to rid yourself of all thoughts and feelings, but to just notice them. It's not about dispelling, banishing or fretting over things that may pop into your head, either. The goal is to acknowledge and accept those thoughts, letting them pass on by without dragging you away from your place of peace and stillness.

What makes this difficult is maintaining a sense of presence to our experiences while concurrently experiencing distressing or upsetting emotional and physical sensations.

What is Mindfulness, Why Does it Matter?

As a member of the UHCL community, you have access to some alternative resources that may be incorporated and used to support the contents in this book. For example, the Welltrack app (free for UHCL students) has a Zen Room with relaxing ambiance music, guided meditations, as well as courses that provide psychoeducation on anxiety, depression, managing stress, and finding purpose. Experience a “Zen Room” for real at the Counseling and Mental Health Center Mind Spa, where there is a massage chair, twinkle lights, sound features, and other tools to help relax. Try the Biofeedback Heart Math Program at the Mind Spa to focus on your breath with metrics to see how you can manipulate your heart rate to improve your state of mind.

Some of the exercises in this book are centered on the practice of mindfulness, and others are not. As previously stated, success with mindfulness takes practice. How helpful it is largely depends on the person’s attitudes, perceptions, and ability to think flexibly (which mindfulness intends to address!). With that, almost any routine activity can be done mindfully in that one pays special attention to all the processes involved in that routine or action. For instance, in taking time to brush one’s teeth, one may notice the taste of the toothpaste, feel the bristles of the brush, listen to the sounds, notice the hand movements, or the intricacies of the simple tool. In summary, the idea is to pay attention to things you do not typically pay attention to and appreciate the many elements of life that we habitually take for granted.

Mindful Feeling/Grounding

The purpose of this exercise is to reduce agitation, establish grounding, and help bring you to the present moment. All you need to do it is a quiet place and an object that fits in your hands.

In order to prepare for this exercise, find a quiet and calm place to sit down. Get in a comfortable position in which your hands are free and you may move them in front of you. Hold the object of your choosing between your hands and begin drawing your attention to your breath, establishing a steady inhale and exhale.

After a few deep breaths and a rhythm has been achieved, draw attention to your chest rising and falling as you breathe. Notice the ways in which your body changes. Pay attention to the sensation of air going in through your nose and out through your mouth.



Mindful Feeling/Grounding

When you are ready, gently shift your attention to the object in your hands. Answer the questions:

What is this texture? Is it rough, it is smooth, does it have any ridges? Does it feel like something I have felt before? Where does the material of the object change? Is it a hard object, or can I squish it between my fingers? Notice the unique feeling of the object on each of your individual fingers, in your palm, on the back of your hand. What do you feel? Are there any shapes you can make out just by feeling the object? Is it symmetrical? What kind of material is it made of? Can you imprint your finger in it, just a nail, or is it hard and does not give?

Take your time focusing on the physical features, the sensations you feel in the moment. When other thoughts pop up, acknowledge it, and gently redirect your attention to the present moment.

Continue moving your fingers around the object, asking these questions, and trying your best to answer them without passing judgement. In other words, there are no good or bad qualities of the object, they are just qualities. This is an exercise meant to help you practice being present (in the moment) and non judgmental about thoughts.



The Five Senses

This exercise will help you feel grounded, relaxed, and aware of the present.

Before starting this exercise, pay attention to your breathing. Slow, deep, long breaths can help you maintain a sense of calm or help you return to a calmer state.

Once you find your breath, go through the following steps to help ground yourself:

Acknowledge FIVE things you see around you. It could be a pen, a spot on the ceiling, anything in your surroundings.

Notice FOUR things you can touch around you and pay attention to the feeling. It could be your hair, a pillow, or the ground under your feet.

Identify THREE things you hear. This could be any external sound. If you can hear your belly rumbling that counts! Focus on things you can hear outside of your body.

Recognize TWO things you can smell. You can smell objects around you. Feel free to stand up and look around for things you would like to smell. Try your hands, hair, perhaps food or plant.

Label ONE thing you can taste. What does the inside of your mouth taste like—gum, coffee, or the sandwich from lunch?



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

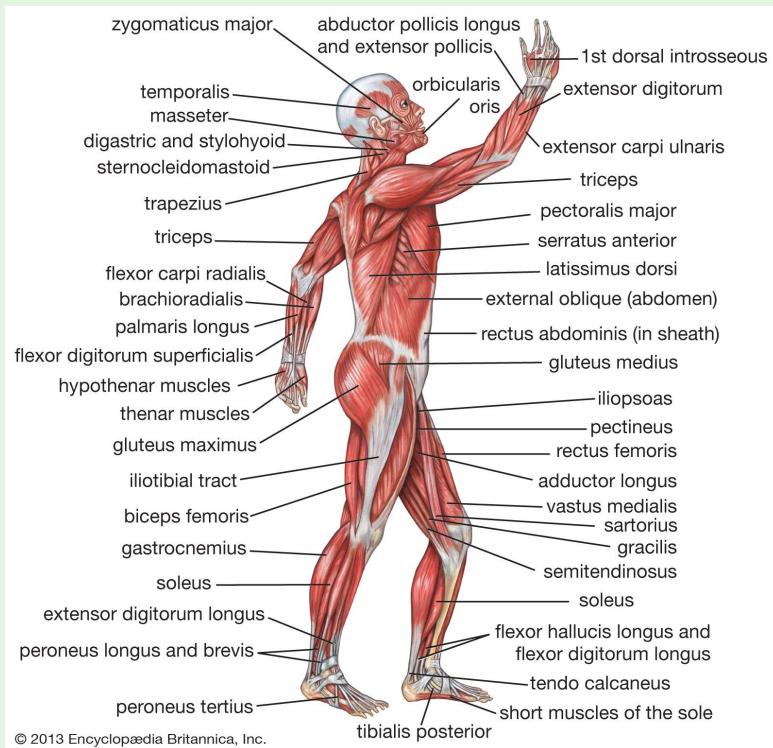
The purpose of this exercise is to notice where tension is being held, practice releasing that tension, and practice mindfulness and intention. To get started, find a comfortable and relaxed position. You may want to close your eyes, or feel free to keep them open if you're more comfortable that way. Rest for 5 seconds at the end of each paragraph:

Let's begin by focusing on your breathing, following your breath as it comes into your body and goes out of your body. Take 3 slow, full natural breaths in and out, noticing how your energy rises on the in-breath and falls on the out breath. Slow even breaths can help our bodies begin to relax as we start to notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Now, focus on your feet, continuing to breathe evenly and naturally. Tighten the muscles in your feet by clenching your toes and pulling the tops of your feet up towards your shins. Hold the tension, continue to hold for 7 seconds... then release and relax, noticing the difference between tension and calm relaxation.

Next, focus on your lower legs. Tighten those muscles in your calves... tight and tense... hold for 7 seconds... then release and relax, allowing the tension to drain away and melt into the ground. Notice the experience of peaceful relaxation in your calves. Continue to breathe naturally and easily as you pay attention to the relaxation in your calves.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Shift your awareness now to your upper legs. Tense and tighten the muscles in your thighs, hold them tight, tensing for 7 seconds... then release and relax, letting any tightness, discomfort or stress flow away while continuing to notice the difference between tension and tranquility. Stay with that experience while continuing to breathe easily and calmly.

Now let's move your awareness to your stomach and back. Tighten those muscles by pulling your belly button as far as you can towards your back, tight and tense. Hold for 7 seconds... then release and relax, making plenty of space in your abdomen for your breath, noticing how it feels to allow your muscles to be still.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (continued)

Gently shift your attention to your hands. Tighten your fingers into tight, tense fists... squeezing as tight as you can... after 7 seconds release and relax, letting any tension or discomfort flow out through your fingertips. Take time for the experience as the tension melts away, replaced by a feeling of calm, peaceful relaxation.

Next focus on your arms. Tighten all of those muscle, pulling your arms in as tight as you can into your body... tight and tense... and hold for 7 seconds... then release and relax, allowing your arms to settle, noticing the difference between stress and stillness. Take the time to breathe into this experience.

Now move on to your shoulders and neck. Go ahead and lift your shoulders up and in, really pulling them into your neck, and hold tight, tensing them for 7 seconds... Then release and relax, letting your shoulders fall gently down and back, letting go of any stress and allowing the muscles in your neck and shoulders to be free from tension.

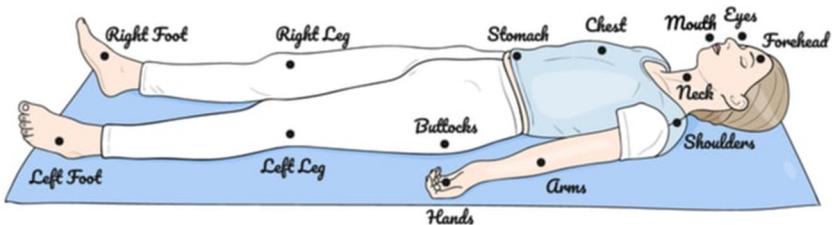
Now gently focus your attention on all the tiny little muscles of your face. Tighten those muscles by tightly shutting your eyes, clenching your jaw and stretching your lips up and back. ... maintain the tension for 7 seconds... then release and relax, letting your muscles be settled and comfortable, paying attention to the difference between the tightness of tension and the comfort of relaxation.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (continued)

And now, imagine looking over your whole body to see if there are any remaining areas of tension or discomfort. Gently breathe into those areas, imagining oxygen is going directly to any areas of tension.

Enjoy for a few more moments the comfort and relaxation you feel ... knowing that you can return here at any time. Allow your body to continue to feel comfortable and relaxed, even as your attention turns elsewhere. When we are relaxed we are more focused, experience less pain and are more able to be connected to what we are doing.

When you are ready, take one more full breath and gently bring your attention to the world around you.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Pleasant Activity Planning

The aim of this is to increase intentional behavior, facilitate having a pleasurable moment in each day, and reduce anxiety and burn-out. Pleasant activity scheduling involves scheduling and participating in positive events that are meant to boost your mood. Sometimes when we are overwhelmed, we choose to shut ourselves in and maybe stay in bed for a while. While getting that rest can be helpful, it can also reinforce our feelings of sadness and loneliness. Planning pleasurable activities can be something to look forward to and is an opportunity to re-energize you. On this page, you will find a list of activities that some find pleasurable. Take a look and see what you like or would like to try, and then schedule it! Do your best to engage in the activity for at least 20 minutes.

Activities to try:

- Go to the movies.
- Buy tickets to see a play or production.
- Go to the ocean, a river, or a lake.
- Go for a walk, run, swim, or bicycle ride.
- Take a walk in a nearby park.
- Read a short story.
- Pick up a pencil and paper and draw something.
- Visit a fresh food or flower market.
- Try a new recipe.
- Go outside and look up at the stars or the clouds.
- Wander in a book shop, antiques, or fishing & camping store.
- Take a trip on bus, train, or ferry.
- Take yourself out to lunch.
- Visit a library.
- Listen to some music,
- Go and see some live music.
- Take a look at an old photo album or journal.
- Visit a local museum or art gallery.

- Text (or call!) a friend.
- Take a dog for a walk or play with some animals.
- Cook a favorite meal or snack.
- Re-organize your files, cupboards, living space or shed.
- Do a puzzle or brain-teaser.
- Plan a trip or short break.
- Watch your favorite TV program or movie.
- Do some exercise.
- Play a short workout video
- Go bowling, golfing or fishing.
- Sit and watch the sunrise or sunset.
- Lie in the shade for a while.
- Re-engage in an old favorite hobby.
- Start a new hobby: Stamp or coin collecting, model building, painting, woodworking.
- Recycle or donate some old items you don't use anymore.
- Plan an evening or barbecue with some old friends.
- Clean or work on your car or bike.
- Repair some things around the house.
- Do some gardening, or water and fertilize the plants.
- Fly a kite.
- Go camping.
- Go sailing, kayaking or canoeing.
- Try doodling or sketching whatever comes to mind (See Color/Art Therapy)
- Explore a part of town you do not visit frequently.
- Go bird-watching.
- Watch a TV show episode that makes you laugh.
- Play (or learn) a musical instrument.
- Go for a bushwalk or hike.
- Learn a dance choreography.
- Do in-depth research on a topic of interest.



Armand Bayou Nature Trail



- Sing some fun songs
- Do some writing – journal, think-piece, article, story, poem. (See Writing Prompts)
- Book a massage.
- Go to a sports event.
- Take some artsy pictures.
- Spend some time with the kids (either yours or those close to you).
- Go on a picnic.
- Play a game on your phone or computer.
- Try a martial arts class.
- Re-arrange the furniture in your house.

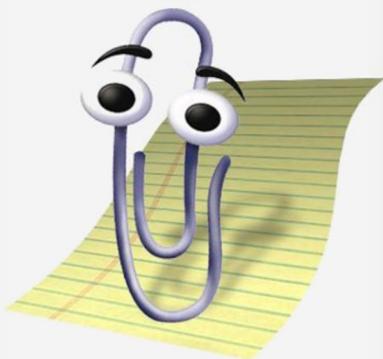
- Meditate.
- Look for flowers.
- Listen to an entire album by an artist you like.
- Make a playlist for a specific mood or event.
- Create a playlist for a friend.
- Follow a traditional or family recipe.
- Deep clean a room/area where you live.
- Go rock climbing, or some other activity you've always wanted to try.
- Check out an arts and crafts store.
- If you do not have someone you feel you can talk to, try [Togetherall](#), a free (with UHCL email) and anonymous forum where you can post and connect with others.

Be safe as you explore! This is a great reason to try things you have never done before, learn things about yourself (what you enjoy, changes in preference over time) and the world around you.

Write it Out Prompts

This activity is meant to increase cognitive flexibility, be a form of expression, and increase self-understanding. Journaling is an effective way to practice mindfulness. It allows you to contemplate more about what's going on in your life, help you process your thoughts, and refocus on the present. While there is no prescribed amount you need to write, try your hardest to expand the page with details and depth. Here are some prompts to help get you started!

- Write a letter to your younger self. What advice would you give them?
- What were you worried about this time last year? Are you still worried about that now?
- Close your eyes and imagine a peaceful, calm place. Describe that place.
- When do you feel most alive?
- What are three things you are good at?
- Discuss your biggest pet peeve.
- What things do you procrastinate on?
- What has been the highlight of my day? Week? Month? Year?
- Who is your best friend, and why?
- What thought or belief do you live your life by?
- How do you impact those around you?
- What was your last meal, what did it taste like?
- What does your current morning routine look like?
- What does personal growth mean to you?
- Write about something you're looking forward to.



Write it Out Prompts

- What is it like to step out of your comfort zone?
- What can you do differently tomorrow?
- When was the last time you laughed so hard you cried?
- Is it easy to admit when I am wrong?
- What was the last thing you splurged on?
- Describe your ideal date.
- Use five points of view to describe one situation.
- Think about what you are most proud of. Follow the story of how you got to that point.
- You have the power to create, and star in, your own reality show. What does it look like?
- What's the greatest advice you've ever been given? What if you lived solely according to it?
- Write a story about a character waking up to something absurd.
- Imagine what it would be like to be a pop star.
- You get one chance to talk to any person in the world. Who do you choose?
- What do you find to be most beautiful in the world?
- Explore what it means to be religious versus spiritual.
- If you could talk to God, what would you want to say?
- You get lost in a foreign city with no cell phone and no money. What do you do?
- Describe the foreign foods that you most want to try.
- What do you think is most misunderstood about the culture of your home country?

Reframing

This technique is used to increase cognitive flexibility, mindfulness, and nonjudgmental participation with the present moment. Reframing is a way of changing the way you look at something and, consequently, changing your experience of it. It is a way to alter our perceptions of stressors and, thus, relieve significant amounts of stress and create a more positive life before actually making any changes. Seeing a situation from a different point of view can help you feel better and uncover new ways to manage a problem or situation. Reframing is a therapeutic process that helps the individual discover, challenge, and modify or replace their negative, irrational thoughts.

First, practice noticing your cognitive distortions. Our brains are continually processing lots of information. To deal with this, our brains seek shortcuts to cut down our mental burden. Sometimes, those internal mental filters or biases may be inaccurate and result in fueling anxiety and cause us to feel bad about ourselves. These mental shortcuts, when they are not helpful, are called cognitive distortions. A list of common cognitive distortions is provided in the following pages. This list is not exhaustive, but may be helpful to identify irrational beliefs.

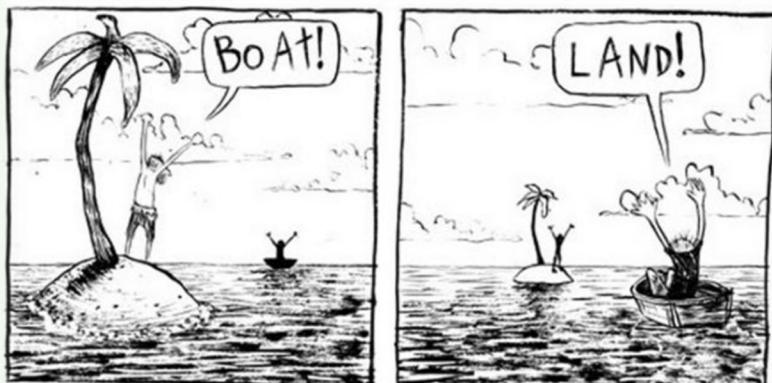


Reframing

To effectively engage in reframing, every time you're experiencing a distortion, point it out to yourself. As an example, feeling anxious before an exam. Are you telling yourself you're going to fail? Are you thinking that if you fail this exam, it will lead to a long line of failures?

Next, evaluate the evidence. Attempt to separate your thoughts and emotions and consider what the actual facts of the situation are. Be curious to see if there is a reframe you can apply?

Lastly, practice compassion – give yourself grace and patience. Treat yourself as you would a friend, relating to yourself in a way that's forgiving, accepting, and loving.



PERSPECTIVE

Reframing

Cognitive Distortions

- Filtering: draining and straining all positives in a situation and, instead, dwelling on its negatives. Even if there are more positive aspects than negative in a situation or person, you focus on the negatives.
- Polarized thinking/All-or-Nothing Thinking: thinking about yourself and the world in an “all-or-nothing” way, which usually leads to extremely unrealistic standards for yourself and others that could affect your relationships and motivation. Also referred to as black-and-white thinking
- Overgeneralization: you take an isolated negative event and turn it into a never-ending pattern of loss and defeat. Words like “always,” “never,” “everything,” and “nothing” are frequent in your train of thought.
- Jump to conclusions/Mindreading: to interpret an event or situation negatively without evidence supporting such a conclusion. Then, reacting to that assumption.
- Catastrophizing/Fortune Telling: related to jumping to conclusions, but you jump to the worst possible conclusion in every scenario, no matter how improbable it is. This cognitive distortion often comes with “what if” questions and predict that things will turn out badly .
- Personalization: leads you to believe that you’re responsible for events that, in reality, are completely or partially out of your control. This cognitive distortion often results in you feeling guilty or assigning blame without contemplating all factors involved.
- Magnification/Minimization: exaggeration of the importance of problems and shortcomings, or you minimization of the importance of your desirable qualities. This is also called the “binocular trick.”
- Emotional Reasoning: You assume that your negative emotions necessarily reflect the way things really are.
- Labeling: an extreme form of all-or-nothing thinking. Instead of saying “I made a mistake,” you attach a negative label to yourself.
- Should statements: You tell yourself that things should be the way you hoped or expected them to be. These inherently imply a judgement. Try switching “should” to “could” and notice the difference in the meaning of the sentence.

Making Meaning

This page is meant to help you reset and reorient yourself towards a purpose. Identifying this purpose will make it easier to make decisions, provide a sense of satisfaction, and general contentment. Feeling like what you do is worthwhile is an important aspect of living a happy life. However, this meaning and purpose is different for each person. This article touches on a few helpful strategies for exploring and identifying a purpose.

1. First, identify things you care about. Write down and rank the things you care about or things that bring excitement. Notice if there are any themes that stand out.
 2. Reflect on your values. A list of values is provided on the following page. It can be helpful to identify the values that resonate with you, define them, and ponder on how those values are currently incorporated (or not incorporated) in your life. Ranking them in order of importance may also be helpful.

Making Meaning

3. Identify your strengths. What are you good at? How can those strengths be useful in achieving goals? Ask others for help identifying strengths if you have trouble coming up with your own.
4. Volunteer your time and energy. Finding meaning in life involves trying new things, highlighting how those activities enable you to use your skills to make a meaningful difference in the world. Volunteering in a community organization focused on something of interest to you could provide you with some experience and do good at the same time. A directory of volunteering opportunities is available from the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership (<https://uhcl.campuslabs.com/engage/organizations>)
5. Imagine your best self. Imagine yourself 40 years in the future, if everything had gone as well as it could have, consider these things: what are you doing? What is important to you? What do you really care about, and why? What do you want to be known for?

Values	Courage	Giving	Organization	Spirituality
Acceptance	Courtesy	Goodness	Originality	Spontaneous
Accomplishment	Creation	Grace	Passion	Stability
Accountability	Creativity	Gratitude	Patience	Status
Accuracy	Credibility	Greatness	Peace	Stewardship
Achievement	Curiosity	Growth	Performance	Strength
Adaptability	Decisive	Happiness	Persistence	Structure
Alertness	Decisiveness	Hard work	Playfulness	Success
Altruism	Dedication	Harmony	Poise	Support
Ambition	Dependability	Health	Potential	Surprise
Amusement	Determination	Honesty	Power	Sustainability
Assertiveness	Development	Honor	Present	Talent
Attentive	Devotion	Hope	Productivity	Teamwork
Awareness	Dignity	Humility	Professionalism	Temperance
Balance	Discipline	Humor	Prosperity	Thankful
Beauty	Discovery	Imagination	Purpose	Thorough
Boldness	Drive	Improvement	Quality	Thoughtful
Bravery	Effectiveness	Independence	Realistic	Timeliness
Brilliance	Efficiency	Individuality	Reason	Tolerance
Calm	Empathy	Innovation	Recognition	Toughness
Candor	Empower	Inquisitive	Recreation	Traditional
Capable	Endurance	Insightful	Reflective	Tranquility
Careful	Energy	Inspiring	Respect	Transparency
Certainty	Enjoyment	Integrity	Responsibility	Trust
Challenge	Enthusiasm	Intelligence	Restraint	Trustworthy
Charity	Equality	Intensity	Results-oriented	Truth
Cleanliness	Ethical	Intuitive	Reverence	Understanding
Clarity	Excellence	Joy	Rigor	Uniqueness
Clever	Experience	Justice	Risk	Unity
Comfort	Exploration	Kindness	Satisfaction	Valor
Commitment	Expressive	Knowledge	Security	Victory
Common sense	Fairness	Lawful	Self-reliance	Vigor
Communication	Family	Leadership	Selfless	Vision
Community	Famous	Learning	Sensitivity	Vitality
Compassion	Fearless	Liberty	Serenity	Wealth
Competence	Feelings	Logic	Service	Welcoming
Concentration	Ferocious	Love	Sharing	Winning
Confidence	Fidelity	Loyalty	Significance	Wisdom
Connection	Focus	Mastery	Silence	Wonder
Consciousness	Foresight	Maturity	Simplicity	
Consistency	Fortitude	Meaning	Sincerity	
Contentment	Freedom	Moderation	Skill	
Contribution	Friendship	Motivation	Skillfulness	
Control	Fun	Openness	Smart	
Conviction	Generosity	Optimism	Solitude	
Cooperation	Genius	Order	Spirit	

Humor

A sense of humor can build resilience to stress and improve your overall physical and emotional health. *The purpose of this page is to encourage the use of humor to cope with stressors in a healthy way.* Finding some humor in a situation may facilitate a shift in perspective—help you take a step back and see things more clearly as well as lessen the impact of the stressor.

One experiment to relieve stress using humor is simple: smile! Even faking a smile can increase happiness because the act of smiling, whether real or fake, causes your body to release feel-good chemicals known as endorphins. More so, a fake smile tends to lead to a genuine one, helping laughter come more easily and, in turn, quelling stress more readily.



Humor

Another way to bring humor into your life is to turn your attention to (relatable) entertainment. Humorous sitcoms, memes, and online videos are popular in part because they often push universally frustrating situations a little further to show their silly sides. Such interpretations of life can help you maintain a lighthearted attitude and find your own style of seeing the world. This also presents an opportunity to feel connected to others who have had similar experiences and can find humor in the stress.

Be warned, however, that humor can be harmful to yourself or others in some cases. It depends on the style of humor being used. Particularly, negative humor (self-defeating; aggressive) can be contradictory to the goal. Putting yourself and others down will not typically induce humor, but perhaps sadness or anger.



Temperature Shock

This exercise is best suited for when you are feeling highly emotionally activated, a state in which information processing and cognitive flexibility are heavily compromised. Use this technique when you feel emotionally out of control and need to still be present or make decisions. In this exercise, you will “reset” the nervous system by activating something called the “mammalian dive reflex.” This will result in a calming feeling. In engaging this reflex, your heart rate drops down and the parasympathetic nervous system is activated to prompt a relaxation response.



To do this exercise, you will need a large bowl filled with cold (not freezing; above 50° F) water. Dunk your head and ensure that your face is submerged, especially the area around your eyes. Keep your face down for approximately 30 seconds, or as long as you can comfortably hold your breath.

Alternatively, you can take a cold shower or even place ice packs under your eyes and above your cheekbones for around 30 seconds (or as long as you can comfortably can). This will result in a



similar effect, calming you and providing relief from intense emotions.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a type of focused relaxation or meditation *aimed at reducing stress, promoting relaxation, and easing symptoms of anxiety.* It involves concentrating on a specific object, sound, or experience in order to calm your mind. It's a relaxation technique that involves visualizing positive, peaceful settings like a beautiful beach or a peaceful meadow. You don't need much to use this technique, only a quiet spot, a place to sit or lay down, and either your own imagination or recorded guided visualizations.

The rationale behind this practice and others in this book is to make use of the mind-body connection. In guided imagery, you intentionally think of a peaceful place or scenario. The goal is to promote a calm state through relaxation and mindfulness. The idea is that your body reacts to your own thoughts.

Check out the UHCL Counseling and Mental Health Center Mind Spa and Self Help tab for access to a variety of guided imagery recordings! (<https://www.uhcl.edu/counseling-services/resources/visualization>)



Color/ Art Therapy

Art therapy can take on various forms, and *it can be used to help people deal with strong emotions, increase self-awareness and self-worth, and decrease stress and anxiety.* Art therapy can involve a variety of creative expression including drawing, painting, coloring or sculpting, to name a few. Taking time to engage with your creative side and express yourself through this medium may help you tap into your inner thoughts, feelings.

There are a number of projects you can take on, as complicated as making a sculpture, to simple like coloring between lines and free association drawing. You may access coloring pages from the UHCL Counseling and Mental Health Center waiting room, where there are print-outs and coloring pencils for your convenience.

Be thoughtful that your artwork is your own, avoid characterizing the pieces as “good” or “bad” based on techniques or form. The primary goal is to express emotions and thoughts, regardless if it results in a pretty picture. Also keep in mind there is

no pressure to keep or share this work, if that is what you choose.



Color/Art Therapy

Engaging in Art Therapy can help you feel centered, heard, relaxed, and sometimes distracted from a stressor. More than that, it is a way to engage your brain, your eyes, your fine and gross motor movements, and visualization skills. Turning your attention to creating may help improve your mood, improve emotion regulation skills, and increase use of mindfulness. It can serve as an opportunity to distract yourself from stressful events and difficult emotions so you may process and consider multiple responses instead of behaving impulsively.

Some have proposed that art can help people increase self-esteem by providing abilities that can be acquired and mastered. Creating art, whether one becomes an artist or not, is inspiring. It develops inventive talents and an awareness of work planning and execution. It fosters the sense of self-sufficiency and the deep satisfaction of using one's artistic ability and mental capacity to generate outcomes one values and desires to share further.

See the next pages for some ideas!

Color/Art Therapy

1. Freedom looks like ... Engage in visualization to create a piece of artwork that represents your idea of freedom and what it means to you.

2. Sculpt your emotions. Make a physical representation of the anger or sadness you feel or have in your life. You can create shapes, structures, and images that show your emotions.

3. Document a happy experience you had. Create a visual representation of the event, the feelings, and the joy.

4. Draw yourself as a plant or animal. Add as many or a few details as you like!

5. Like a geographic map, create a map of your inner world. To do this, think about what feelings shape it, which states prevail in you ("ocean of love", or "mountain of courage"). Leave the "undiscovered islands" to discover new qualities. The exercise forms an idea of yourself; helps to understand and express your feelings.

6. Using a dark color, draw squiggles and lines all over a paper. Once you are satisfied, start coloring in between the lines.

Color/Art Therapy

7. Create a past, present and future self-portrait. This drawing or painting should reflect where you have been, who you are today, and how see yourself in the future.
8. Try your best to depict your “happy place” - a place where you feel safe and calm.
9. Draw or paint two masks: one mask that shows how you feel you present to the world, and a second that depicts how you actually feel inside.
10. Choose an object around you that sparks emotion. Try to recreate it using materials at hand.
11. Create the album cover to a playlist that you create for a mood or event.
12. Collect magazines and create a collage or alternative image using cut-outs of the magazines.
13. Draw with your eyes closed! Not being able to see what you are drawing intensifies fluidity, intuition, touch and sensitivity.
14. Color in a design. Sometimes, the simple act of coloring can be a great way to relax. Find a coloring book or use print-outs from the front office at the Counseling and Mental Health Center.

Connecting With Nature

The goal of this page is to encourage thinking outside of ourselves and relate with the chaotic yet peaceful and beautiful world around us. Evidence has demonstrated an important link between exposure/interaction with nature (landscapes, water, dirt) and a host of mental, physical, and psychological health benefits.

One of the theories used to explain this connection suggests there's a built-in preference for natural spaces because, originally, they provided us with everything we needed to prosper and evolve as a species. While we may not fully understand the details of the human-nature affiliation, the beneficial effects of connecting with nature cannot be denied. We know that natural environments have two major benefits for our emotions: firstly, being connected to nature can lead to stress reduction and mood improvement. Studies have found a correlation between exposure to natural stimuli, stress and anger reduction, and improvement in self-reported psychological well-being and mental health. Secondly, there is an emotional benefit of feeling attuned to nature which promotes one's ability to enjoy stronger bonds with others. A better and more relaxed mood translates into a more compassionate attitude that can improve the quality of social relationships.



Connecting With Nature

Try to notice nature wherever you are, in whatever way is meaningful for you. Spend some quiet time to reflect in natural surroundings using all your senses. Consider visiting parks and gardens, organizing a picnic, or trying to meet others outdoors whenever possible. Other ways to connect with nature include, taking up gardening or kitchen garden, growing your own herbs or vegetable patch, and taking your time to savor whole foods. Other simple ways to connect with nature include going outside for stargazing, cloud watching, or birdwatching.

Perhaps you can go on a hiking or camping trip. Make an effort to watch a sunset or even a sunrise every once in a while. Take note of the things you see, hear, smell, and feel. Keep in mind that

you don't need to visit the deepest and most secluded wilderness to experience the full benefits of connecting with nature; you can connect with nature by observing a tree, sitting in grass, or even looking out on a body of water.



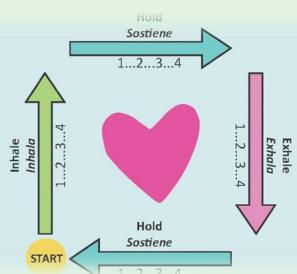
Breath Work

Breath work refers to deep, diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing, which research suggests may trigger relaxation responses in the body. While there are various breathing exercises you can do, the ones included here are *meant to help you regulate, calm the nervous system, and reduce stress.*

Follow the instructions for each breathing technique. Remember to check out the Biofeedback Heart Math program at UHCL Counseling and Mental Health Center.

4-4-4 (Box Breathing): A good time to practice Box Breathing is before or during stressful events and as a part of your bedtime routine. Sit up straight in a supported position with your hands resting palms up or palms down on your knees. If it feels safe, close your eyes, or look down if that feels more comfortable. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose for 4 seconds. Hold that for 4 seconds. Exhale through your mouth for 4 seconds. At the bottom of the exhale, hold your breath for 4 seconds before repeating the cycle. Repeat for up to 10 minutes.

If you are having trouble staying focused during this exercise tap each fingertip to your thumb as you count to four.



Mindful Breath: pulls the focus off of things that might be troubling you and instead focuses your attention on the simple act of breathing. Any time of day is a good time to practice Mindful Breathing. Sit up straight in a supported position with your hands resting palms up or palms down on your knees. If it feels safe close your eyes or look down if that feels more comfortable.

Settle In: allow yourself "land" in your body. Feel the support of the chair and the floor underneath you. Notice the temperature of the room. What sounds can you hear? Try to relax your body while still feeling supported.

When you are ready, turn your attention inward. Without changing anything bring your focus to your breath. Notice the inhale and the exhale. Ask yourself where your breath is going in your body. Imagine you can see it going through you. Is your breath going to your chest? To your belly? Can you feel the air coming in and out of your nose? Can you feel your breath in your mouth? Is there a pause between the inhale and exhale? No need to change anything. Simply sit here and breathe and pay attention.

Practice this for 15 minutes if you can, perhaps set a timer to help you manage and stay focused.

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