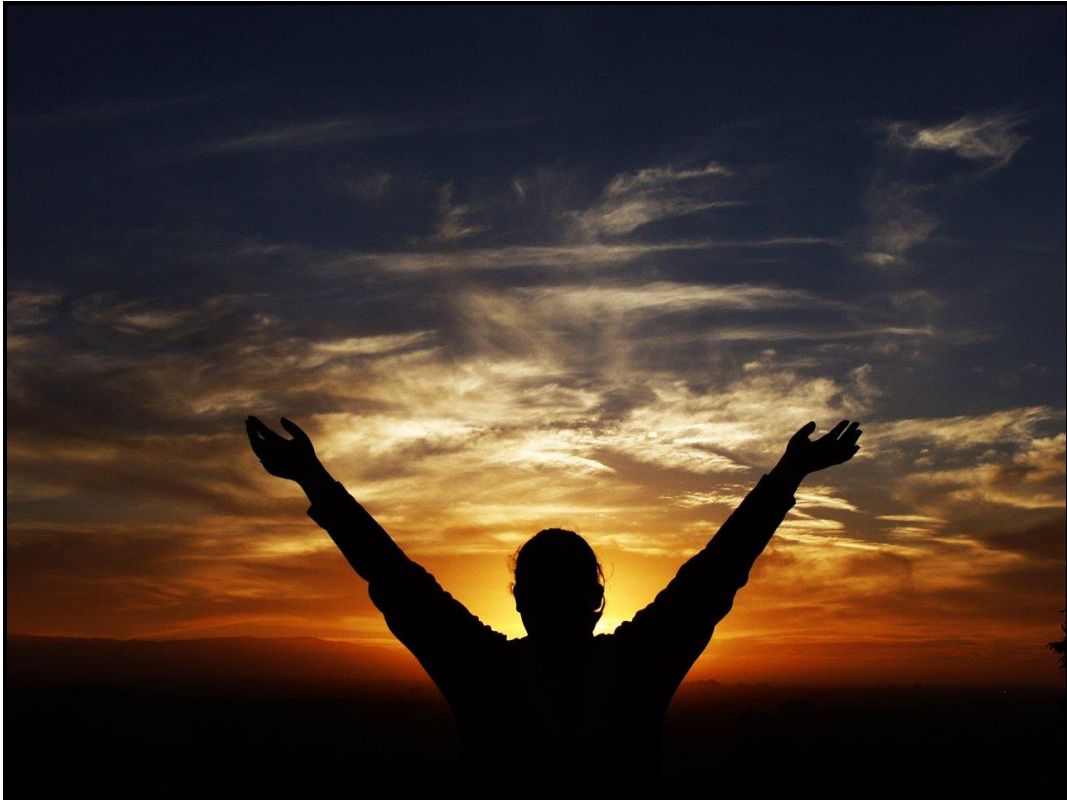


Understanding & Managing Stress and Anxiety



iCope: Camden Psychological Therapies & Wellbeing Service
Self-Referral Line: 0203 317 7600

What is included in this pack:

- Understanding Stress
- Effects and Triggers of Stress/ Anxiety
- Stress Bucket
- Emotion Focussed Techniques
- Problem Focussed Techniques
- Overcoming Unhelpful Behaviours
- Homework

Understanding Stress

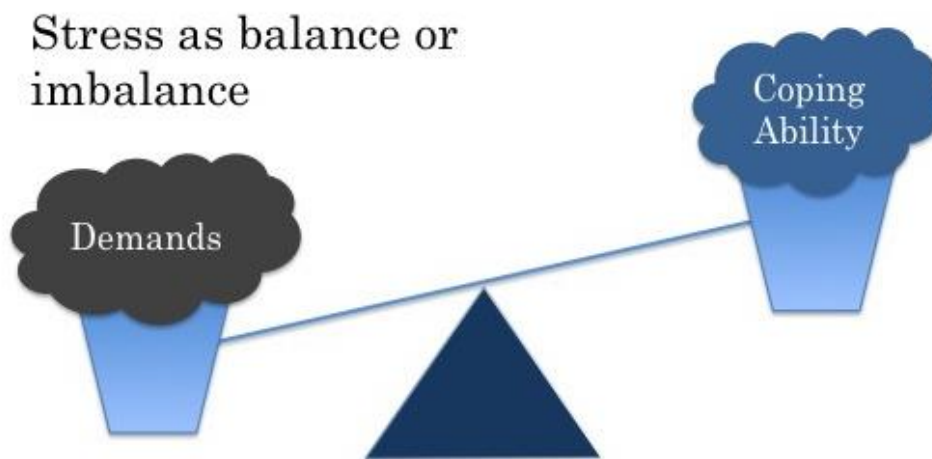
Stress is the word that many people use when they are describing how the demands of their life seem to be becoming too great for them to cope with. The ability to cope varies from person to person and what one person finds stressful may not be a problem for someone else. Stress can affect us in many ways, affecting how we feel, how we think and behave.

Low levels of stress can actually be useful at times to make us concentrate on a goal, or to highlight to us something that needs to change. However, if stress is on-going for a long time it can cause more serious problems. Heart disease, high blood pressure, migraine, asthma, low resistance to infection, bowel problems, fatigue, sleep problems and stomach problems, especially ulcers, are all more likely in people who have been experiencing on-going stress.

These are examples of how we can experience physical illnesses as a result of on-going stress. However, stress can also affect our mental health. Stress and worry are a central part of depression and anxiety, and can often come before these problems present themselves. It is therefore really important to learn how stress affects you and to try and increase your ability to cope with it. That way you can reduce the chances of stress leading you to develop more serious problems.

The Stress Balance

A helpful idea can be to think of ourselves as being like a balance, or a pair of scales:



On one side of the balance is what we see as demands around us, external things such as pressure at work, relationships with other people, or particular situations. On the other side of the balance is what we view as our ability to cope with those demands. Our coping abilities should be great enough to deal with most stresses, and to keep the balance straight. If, however, we have a high level of demands, or judge that we are not able to cope, the balance will become tipped to one side and we may feel stress or anxiety. To make the balance even again, and to not be feeling stressed or anxious, we can: a) reduce the demands, b) increase our coping abilities, or c) do both!

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal human experience. Everyone feels anxious from time to time. For example, many of us feel anxious on top of cliffs, before interviews, or on over-crowded buses. Anxiety can be 'normal' when it fits the situation, but it can also be excessive and unhelpful – i.e. when anxiety starts to dictate our thinking and makes it difficult for us to function in our daily lives.

Fight - Flight - Freeze Response

Humans have evolved to feel anxious in some situations. We needed anxiety when we were cave men & women thousands of years ago, as we lived in dangerous environments that involved physical threat, eg: sabre tooth tigers. Humans developed a response known as the **flight-fight-freeze response**. This means that the moment we sense danger our bodies act to prepare us to tackle it.

Our bodies are really good at protecting us from danger. When the body senses a threat it releases the hormone adrenaline into the blood. This makes our body ready to react to the danger. It is an automatic reaction that we do not control. It is natural and even though it can feel very unpleasant and sometimes frightening, it is not dangerous at all. Thousands of years ago when we were cavemen & women, if a sabre-toothed tiger appeared, we needed to be able to fight or escape from the danger.

So our bodies release adrenaline making our heartbeat and breathing faster. This gets blood to our muscles and brain. We are now more alert and our muscles are stronger. Once we had either run away or fought the tiger, the effects of adrenaline wear off and our body then returns to normal. If we were in a situation where fighting or running away aren't going to be much help, our body 'freezes' like a rabbit caught in headlights – so that we stay absolutely still and can't be seen.



The problem with the fight-flight-freeze response nowadays, is that many situations that we face day to day don't require such a high level of physical response.

For example, when you go into a job interview, it's not really that helpful if your body is in full adrenalin swing, or if it freezes so that you can't even think.

Fight - Flight - Freeze Response (continued)

The other problem is that if we don't flee or fight ourselves out of the situation, this means that the anxiety is not 'burnt off' and it keeps on affecting our bodies. The physical effects of anxiety on our bodies and mind can feel frightening, but they are normal and not dangerous. The picture below lists the main symptoms of anxiety and why they happen in relation to our body's fight-flight-freeze response.

Fight Or Flight Response

When faced with a life-threatening danger it often makes sense to run away or, if that is not possible, to fight. The *fight or flight response* is an *automatic* survival mechanism which prepares the body to take these actions. All of the body sensations produced are happening for good reasons – to prepare your body to run away or fight – but may be experienced as uncomfortable when you do not know why they are happening.

Thoughts racing

Quicker thinking helps us to evaluate danger and make rapid decisions. It can be very difficult to concentrate on anything apart from the danger (or escape routes) when the fight or flight response is active

If we don't exercise (e.g. run away or fight) to use up the extra oxygen then we can quickly start to feel dizzy or lightheaded

Dizzy or lightheaded

Changes to vision

Vision can become acute so that more attention can be paid to danger. You might notice 'tunnel vision', or vision becoming 'sharper'

Breathing becomes quicker and shallower

Quicker breathing takes in more oxygen to power the muscles. This makes the body more able to fight or run away

Dry mouth

The mouth is part of the digestive system. Digestion shuts down during dangerous situations as energy is diverted towards the muscles

Adrenal glands release adrenaline

The adrenaline quickly signals other parts of the body to get ready to respond to danger

Heart beats faster

A faster heart beat feeds more blood to the muscles and enhances your ability to fight or run away

Bladder urgency

Muscles in the bladder sometimes relax in response to extreme stress

Nausea and 'butterflies' in the stomach

Blood is diverted away from the digestive system which can lead to feelings of nausea or 'butterflies'

Palms become sweaty

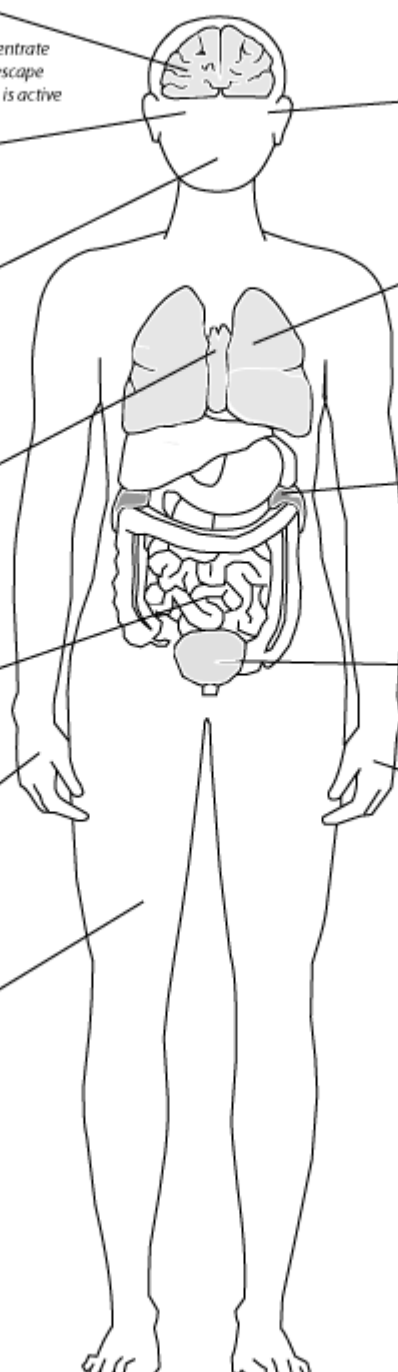
When in danger the body sweats to keep cool. A cool machine is an efficient machine, so sweating makes the body more likely to survive a dangerous event

Hands get cold

Blood vessels in the skin contract to force blood towards major muscle groups

Muscles tense

Muscles all over the body tense in order to get you ready to run away or fight. Muscles may also shake or tremble, particularly if you stay still, as a way of using up excess adrenaline



Different Types of Anxiety

So as we have seen, it would be odd if we didn't experience any anxiety at all, but anxiety can be problematic in two ways:

- 1) You may find that you become anxious when there is no real danger, but to you it seems as though there is.
- 2) You may find that you become anxious in situations where most people would feel a bit nervous, but that your anxiety is more excessive.

Although there are common signs and symptoms of anxiety that many of us experience like: our heart beating faster, sweating and worried thoughts, people can also experience different types of anxiety problems. Some examples include:

- **Social Anxiety:** excessive anxiety in social situations, where people often believe other people are judging them.
- **Health Anxiety:** fear & anxiety about having a serious disease, or of contracting one.
- **Specific Phobia:** fear and avoidance of a particular object or situation. Common phobias include: flying, heights, dogs, needles, blood and small spaces.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder:** where people have thoughts, impulses or images that make them anxious, and then have to carry out particular actions or behaviours to prevent harm / help them feel less anxious.
- **Generalised Anxiety:** where people feel anxious most of the time, for long periods of time, and worry excessively about lots of different things.
- **Panic attacks:** where people experience frequent periods of intense fear & anxiety when there is no real danger. They often experience strong physical symptoms and thoughts of losing control or dying.

Internal & External Triggers for Stress/ Anxiety

People experience stress/ anxiety in different situations and for different reasons. There are many different 'triggers' for stress/ anxiety. These can be internal triggers (within ourselves) and external triggers (from our environment).

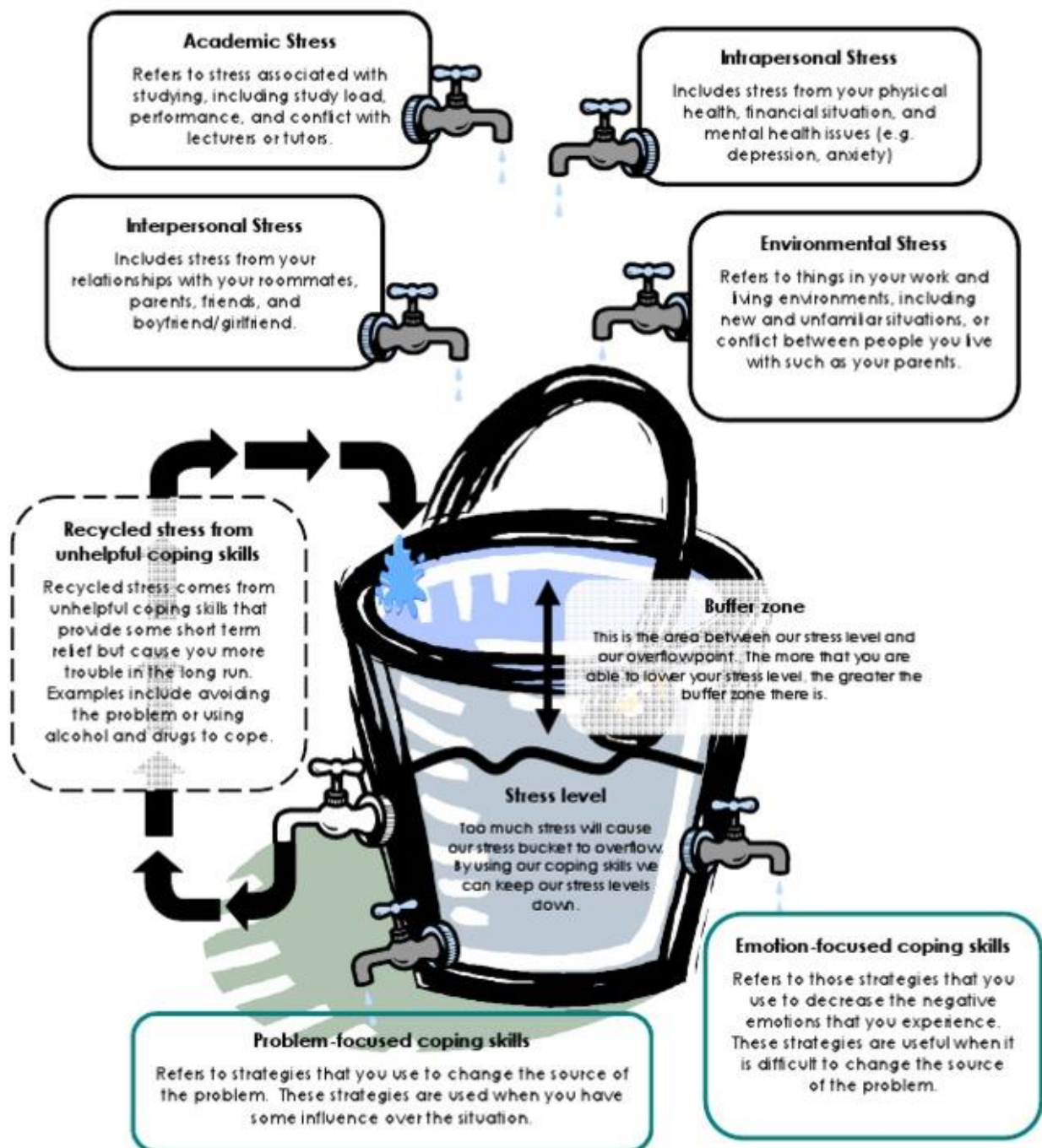
Below are some internal and external triggers, and some possible coping strategies – some of which we've already covered, others we will come onto in the next few pages. ***See if you can add in some of your own anxiety triggers and coping strategies.***

Internal Triggers	Coping Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thoughts about people judging me• Worry about bills• Worry about headache•••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thought challenging?• Problem solving?• Distraction?•••

External Triggers	Coping Strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overcrowded bus• Stress at work••••	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Controlled breathing?• Progressive muscle relaxation?••••

It can be useful to use an analogy of a bucket to organise these triggers and coping strategies....

Stress Bucket explained...



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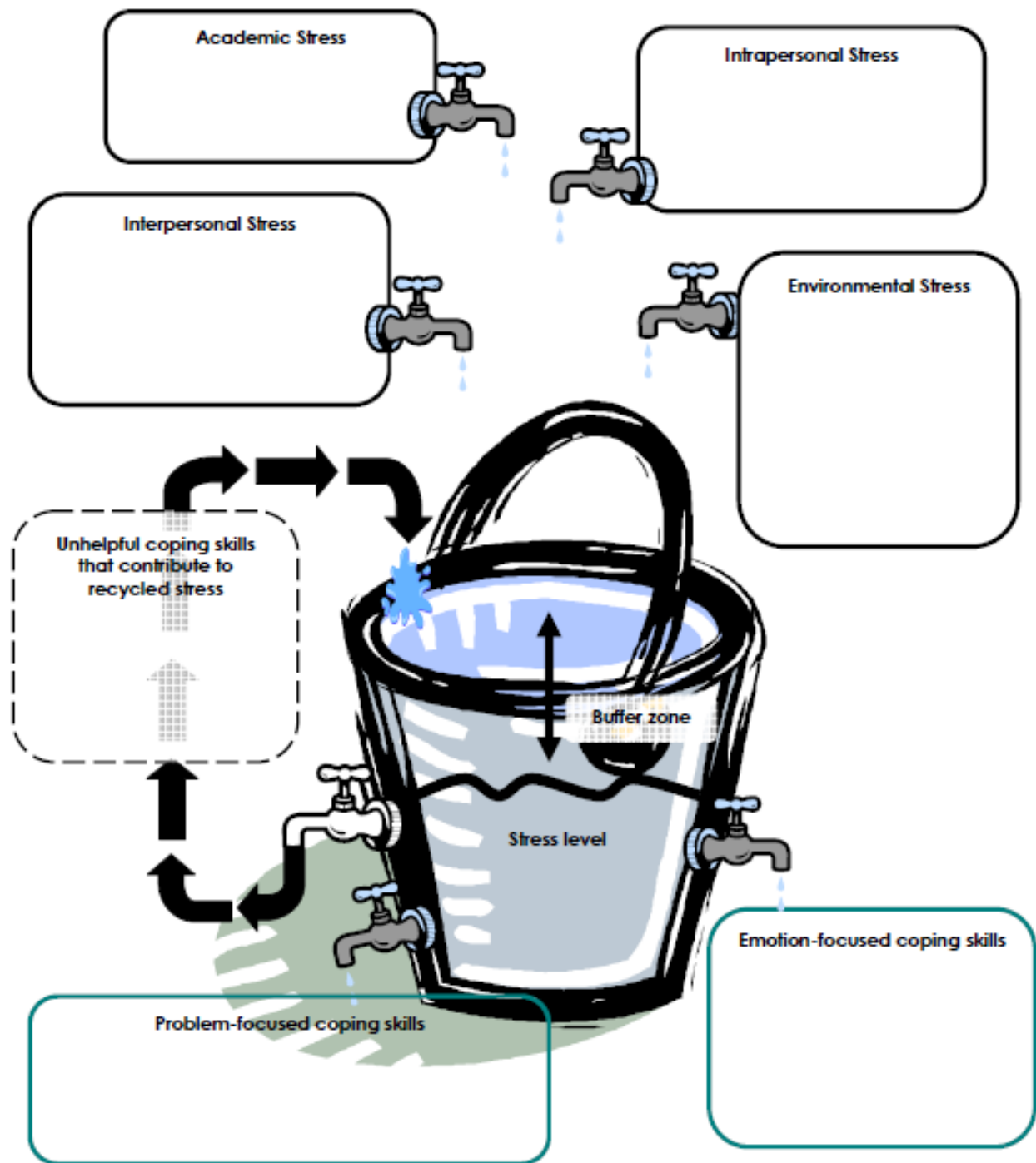
This handout is based on the following resources:

Carver, C.S., Scheier, M.F., & Weintraub, J.K. (1989). Assessing coping strategies: A theoretically based approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *56*, 267-283.

Bass, S.E., Hebling, B.C., & Heckert, T.M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *College Student Journal*, *33*, 312-317.

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PROGRAMS

My Stress Bucket



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Ross, S.E., Niebling, B.C., & Heckert, T.M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *College Student Journal*, 33, 312-317.

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PROGRAMS

Emotion Focused Coping Skills

Controlled Breathing

The way we breathe is a major factor in producing symptoms such as light headedness, tingling, dizziness and other sensations that are noticeable when we are anxious.

Anxious Breathing

In order for the body to run efficiently, there needs to be a **balance** between oxygen and carbon dioxide, and this balance is maintained through how fast and how deeply we breathe. Of course, the body needs different amounts of oxygen depending on our level of activity. When we exercise, there is an *increase* in both oxygen *and* carbon dioxide; in relaxation there is a *decrease* in both oxygen *and* carbon dioxide. In both cases the balance is maintained.

When we are anxious though, this balance is disrupted. Essentially, we take in more oxygen than the body needs – in other words we *overbreathe*, or *hyperventilate*. When this imbalance is detected, the body responds with a number of chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increase in heart rate to pump more blood around, numbness and tingling in the extremities, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness.

These are all very uncomfortable sensations, though are not actually dangerous. Although overbreathing and hyperventilation are not dangerous, continued overbreathing can leave you feeling exhausted or “on edge” so that you’re more likely to respond to stressful situations with intense anxiety and panic.

Controlled Breathing

Controlled breathing is a simple way of taking back control of your body. It reduces the physical symptoms of stress and anxiety.

Slowing down your breathing and breathing in a slightly different way can help you reduce some of the physical symptoms of anxiety.

Controlled breathing can also be useful to help you step out of the moment; calm down; and help you think about things more clearly.

How to do Controlled Breathing:



You can do controlled breathing sitting, standing or laying down. Just make sure you are comfortable.

- 1) Take your hands and place them on your stomach - at the level of your belly button.
- 2) Breathe in through your nose slowly for 3 counts. As you breathe in feel your diaphragm expanding and your fingers moving apart as the breath comes into your stomach.

- 3) Breathe out through your mouth slowly for 3 counts.
- 4) Get into a regular rhythm of slowly saying in your head: “in, two, three...out, two, three...”

Try to slow your breathing rate down to 10 – 12 breaths per minute. Some people find it helpful to watch the second hand of a clock/watch to time their breathing.

Try to practise controlled breathing at least once or twice a day at a time when you can relax, relatively free from distraction. This will help to develop a more relaxed breathing habit. The key to progress really is practise, so try to set aside some time each day.

If you have concerns about doing this type of breathing and its effects on your health (if you have breathing problems for example) go and talk to your doctor before you start.

By using controlled breathing, you can slow your breathing down and reduce your general level anxiety. With enough practice, it can even help to reduce your anxiety when you are in an anxious situation.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Muscle Tension

Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense, but perhaps you clench your teeth slightly so your jaw feels tight, or maybe your shoulders become. Muscle tension can also be associated with backaches and tension headaches.

In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up particular muscles and then relax them, and then you practise this technique consistently.

Preparing for Relaxation

When you are beginning to practice progressive muscle relaxation exercises keep in mind the following points.

- **Physical injuries.** If you have any injuries, or a history of physical problems that may cause muscle pain, always consult your doctor before you start.
- **Select your surroundings.** Minimise the distraction to your five senses. Such as turning off the TV and radio, and using soft lighting.
- **Make yourself comfortable.** Use a chair that comfortably seats your body, including your head. Wear loose clothing, and take off your shoes.
- **Internal mechanics.** Avoid practicing after big, heavy meals, and do not practice after consuming any intoxicants, such as alcohol.

Procedure for Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
- When you are ready to begin, tense the muscle group described. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel a great deal of pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
- Relax the muscles and keep it relaxed for approximately 10 seconds. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
- When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation Sequence

1. **Right hand and forearm.** Make a fist with your right hand.
2. **Right upper arm.** Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle"
3. **Left hand and forearm**
4. **Left upper arm**
5. **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go
6. **Eyes and cheeks.** Squeeze your eyes tight shut
7. **Mouth and jaw.** Open your mouth as wide as you can, like you are yawning
8. **Neck.** **Be careful as you tense these muscles.** Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling
9. **Shoulders.** Tense shoulder muscles by raising shoulders up towards your ears
10. **Shoulder blades/Back.** Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward
11. **Chest and stomach.** Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air
12. **Hips and buttocks.** Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. **Right upper leg.** Tighten your right thigh
14. **Right lower leg.** **Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps.** Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle
15. **Right foot.** Curl your toes downwards
16. **Left upper leg.** Repeat as for right upper leg
17. **Left lower leg.** Repeat as for right lower leg
18. **Left foot.** Repeat as for right foot

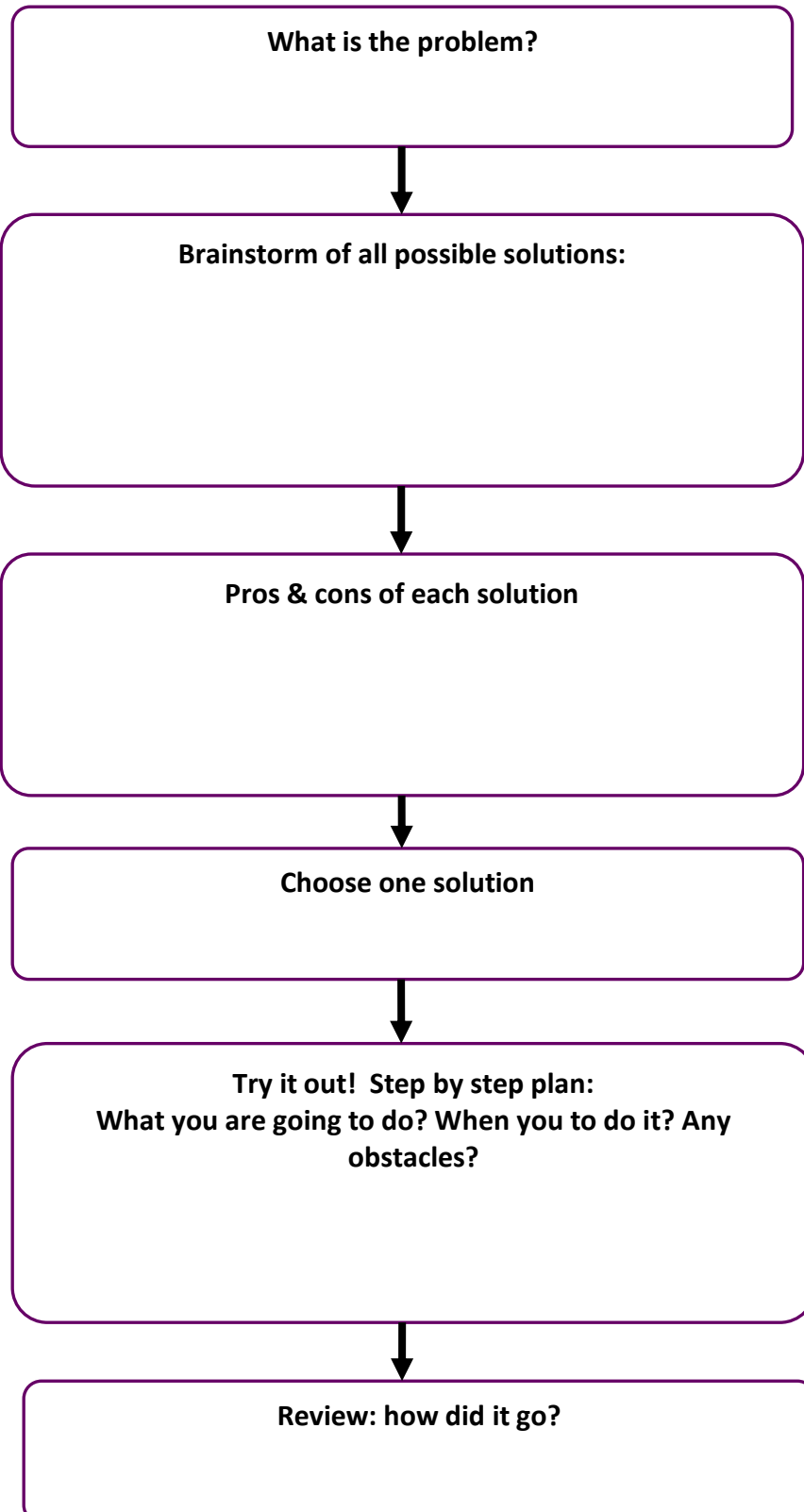
Practice this sequence! Only through practice can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them.



Problem Focussed Coping Skills

Problem Solving

When we have lots of things going on in our lives, it can feel like there is too much to deal with and problems can sometimes feel overwhelming. This can affect our mood and stress levels. It is very easy to spend a lot of time worrying about a problem without finding a way to sort it out. This can make us feel worse and can affect our ability to sleep and think clearly. To help decide what to do, we can use a simple problem solving method:



Five Senses Mindfulness Exercise

Stressed out? Can't stop worrying or thinking about something? Can't focus? Feeling upset? Sometimes we feel like we're caught up in a tornado of thoughts and emotions. The exercise below is a quick and easy method for feeling more centered on a tough day. It's also great to practice at times when you're not as stressed so you know exactly how to use it when you need it the most.

If begin to notice thoughts coming into your mind, that is COMPLETELY normal. Our brains are designed to think but we can learn to refocus our attention. Take this as an opportunity to be kind to yourself and not judge. Just notice that you are having thoughts, then, redirect your attention back to the present moment.

1. **Sit in a comfortable upright position** with your feet planted flat on the ground. Rest your hands on your thighs or on your desk.
2. **Notice your breathe.** No need to breathe in any particular way. Just bring attention to each part of the breath- the inhale, exhale, and space in between.
3. **Bring awareness to each of your 5 senses.** One at a time, for about one minute each. The point here is to focus on the present moment and how each sense is being activated in that moment. The order in which you pay attention to each sense does not matter.

Hear: Begin to notice all of the sounds around you. Try not to judge the sounds- just notice them. They are not good or bad, they just are. Sounds might be internal, like breathing or digestion. Sounds might be close by or more distant like the sound of traffic. Are you now hearing more than you were before you started? You may begin to notice subtle sounds you did not hear before. Can you hear them now?

Smell: Now shift your attention to notice the smells of your environment. Maybe you smell food. You might become aware of the smell of trees or plants if you are outside. You might notice the smell of books or paper. Sometimes closing your eyes can help sharpen your attention.

See: Observe your surrounding and notice the colors, shapes and textures. If you really look, you may notice things that have gone unnoticed.

Taste: You can do this one even if you have food in your mouth. You may notice an aftertaste of a previous drink or meal. You can just notice your tongue in your mouth, your saliva, and your breath as you exhale. We have tastes in our mouth that often go unnoticed. You can run your tongue over your teeth and cheeks to help you become more aware.

Touch: Last one. Bring your attention to the sensations of skin contact with your chair, clothing, and feet on the floor. You can notice the pressure between your feet and the floor or your body and the chair. You can observe temperature like the warmth or coolness of your hands or feet. You might take time to feel the textures that you noticed by sight a moment ago. You can feel several objects on your desk to fully focus your attention on the present.

When finished, pause to notice how your body feels in this moment. Compare how you feel now with how you felt 5 minutes ago- what has changed? Try this exercise next time you're feeling overwhelmed. This can be useful to use before a test or speech, too!

Further Resources

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation:
<https://soundcloud.com/icoperelaxationexercises/sets/relaxation-and-meditation-exercises>
- Controlled breathing – abdominal breathing:
<https://soundcloud.com/search?q=controlled%20breathing%20iapt>
- Visualisation – leaves on a stream: <https://soundcloud.com/user-729358440/04-track-leaves-on-a-stream>
- Link to the iCope Soundcloud:
<https://soundcloud.com/icoperelaxationexercises/sets/relaxation-and-meditation-exercises>
- Link to Mental Health Foundation Podcasts:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/mental-health-podcasts>