

**East Renfrewshire Psychological Service**

# **Building Resilience to Stress**



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# What is Stress?

## Definition

There exists a lack of a succinct definition as to what stress actually is. The term 'stress' is relatively imprecise as acknowledged by the World Health Organisation. However, for our practical purposes the following definition of stress can be made:

*'A combination of physical, mental and emotional feelings that result from pressure, worry and anxiety. How you see the demands being made of you, and how you think you can cope.'* Jennifer Edwards (2004).

Stress is commonly viewed as a frustrated 'fight or flight response', where we respond to a perceived danger by either fighting or fleeing. This stress response can provide us with a useful source of energy and can act as a powerful internal communication designed to raise our awareness. This is a healthy response to immediate danger such as confronting an assailant or escaping danger. However, in modern society, these emotions and behaviours can become problematic and inappropriate.

Stress exacts a heavy toll. It causes chemical changes in the body that, left unchecked, can have negative effects on both mental and physical health. Stress has been implicated in chronic fatigue, ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure, angina, heart attacks and strokes, migraine, drug and alcohol addiction, increased smoking, asthma, diabetes, and post-viral fatigue syndrome (World Health Organisation).

## What causes stress?

We may think of stressful events as unpleasant ones, such as losing a job or having difficulties at home or at work. But changes for the better can also cause stress, like a new baby, a wedding, and a new house. In an ideal world, maybe we could get away from stressful situations, or change them. However, all too often this is not possible – however, we can learn to control our response to those situations. And we can develop techniques that will reduce the effects of stress on our mental and physical health.

What's stressful for you may be quite different from what's stressful to your best friend, your spouse, or your colleagues. For example:

- Some people enjoy speaking in public; others are terrified.

- Some people are more productive under deadline pressure; others are miserably tense.
- Some people are eager to help family and friends through difficult times; others find it very stressful.
- Some people feel comfortable complaining about bad service in a restaurant; others find it so difficult to complain that they prefer to suffer in silence.
- Some people may feel that changes at work represent a welcome opportunity; others worry about whether they'll be able to cope.

([www.eHealthMD.com](http://www.eHealthMD.com))

People also react to stress in different ways. Once you identify your own signs of stress, they can serve as your personal early warning system. You should assess yourself for four types of stress signs:

- Changes in **body functions** and physical health (e.g. backache, muscle tension, nervous stomach, breathing problems, fatigue)
- Changes in **emotions and feelings** (e.g. becoming irritable, sad, worried, tense or angry)
- Changes in **behaviour** (e.g. how much you sleep, eat (too much or too little), drink alcohol, etc.)
- Changes in **thoughts** (e.g. are you finding it hard to concentrate, remember things, look on the bright side?)

When you notice any of these personal early warning signs of stress, it's a sign that you should do something about it to stop stress from overwhelming you physically and emotionally. This booklet will illustrate some of the ways in which you can do this. Just as everyone is different in terms of how they react to stressful situations, everyone is different with regard to what approaches will work best for them in reducing their stress levels. Thus, if you try one approach and feel it doesn't 'work' for you, the important thing is to not give up.

### **The impact of stress on our bodies**

**Acute stress** is a short-term response by the body's sympathetic nervous system. During an acute stress response the adrenal medulla (part of the adrenal glands, two small glands located on the top of each kidney) begins to release catecholamine hormones (including adrenaline and noradrenaline). In all, over seventeen different hormones are released during an acute stress response. These trigger several physical responses.

- Blood sugar levels rise
- Additional red blood cells are released (to carry extra oxygen)
- Peripheral blood vessels constrict
- Pulse quickens

- Blood pressure rises
- Digestion stops

### **Cortisol and Stress**

Cortisol is an important hormone in the body, secreted by the adrenal glands and involved in many important functions, including regulation of blood pressure and immune function. Normally, it's present in the body at higher levels in the morning and at its lowest at night. Although stress isn't the only reason that cortisol is secreted into the bloodstream, it has been termed "the stress hormone" because it's also secreted in higher levels during the body's 'fight or flight' response to stress, and is responsible for several stress-related changes in the body. Small increases of cortisol do have some positive effects:

- A quick burst of energy for survival reasons
- Heightened memory functions
- A burst of increased immunity
- Lower sensitivity to pain
- Helps maintain homeostasis in the body

However, while cortisol is an important and helpful part of the body's response to stress, it's important that the body's relaxation response is activated so that the body's functions can return to normal following a stressful event. Unfortunately, in our current high-stress culture, the body's stress response is activated so often that the body doesn't always have a chance to return to normal, resulting in a state of **chronic stress**.

Higher and more prolonged levels of cortisol in the bloodstream (like those associated with chronic stress) have been shown to have negative effects, such as:

- Impaired cognitive performance
- Suppressed thyroid function
- Blood sugar imbalances such as hyperglycaemia
- Decreased bone density
- Decrease in muscle tissue
- Higher blood pressure
- Lowered immunity and inflammatory responses in the body, slowed wound healing, and other health consequences
- Increased abdominal fat, which is associated with a greater amount of health problems than fat deposited in other areas of the body. Some of the health problems associated with increased stomach fat are heart attacks, strokes,

the development of higher levels of “bad” cholesterol (LDL) and lower levels of “good” cholesterol (HDL), which can lead to other health problems.

To keep cortisol levels healthy and under control, the body’s relaxation response should be activated after the fight or flight response occurs. Researchers now categorise people as either hot or cool responders to stress. Cool responders respond less to higher cortisol levels than hot responders. Whether you may be categorised as a cool responder or a hot responder there are recognised strategies and approaches that may be used to more effectively manage stress. You can learn to relax your body with various stress management techniques, and you can make lifestyle changes in order to keep your body and mind from reacting to stress in the first place.

## **The Key to Stress Management**

Stress cannot be avoided. Life is a never-ending challenge and human endeavour thrives on challenge and realistic ambitions. Every day situations arise which make demands on us. There are decisions to be made, problems to be solved, things to be learned, deadlines to be met... And this is not only the case in the work setting, but also when we are at rest and at play too.

The optimal approach to dealing with stress aims to change our lifestyle and to develop strategies and tactics for coping with stress in order to find the optimum levels of stress compatible with our health and well-being. It is important for us to learn that, in fact, it is not so much the things which stress us that cause problems but the way in which we react to them. Take, for example, a flight delay at an airport. Some people get irate, others just shrug and go back to their reading and still others go up to the counter, get a voucher for the airport bar and walk away smiling. If the event or situation was causing stress, then everyone would be upset every time. As summarised by Dr. Hans Selye, a Canadian endocrinologist, in the 1930s,

*‘It’s not what happens to you but how you take it.’*

# Resilience

## What is resilience?

Resilience is about the ability to deal with and succeed in difficult situations and events. Resilience is a mix of key skills and characteristics of a person and the social supports and environment in which they live ([www.headroom.net.au](http://www.headroom.net.au)).

Think about the people in your life—your friends, family members and colleagues, and think about how these people manage the stresses and strains that are a part of life. People often wonder why it is that some people seem to be able to bounce back from life's difficulties and challenges and work their way through problems while others get stuck in a rut and weighed down by problems. Those people who are able to bounce back from difficult situations are said to be resilient.

*'To reduce stress we need to increase the accuracy of our self-esteem and consequently our subconscious thoughts' (Hans Selye).*

There are a number of characteristics that can be said to leave people with a vulnerability to stress, in contrast to those qualities characterising people who are said to be resilient to stress, as illustrated in the table below.

Vulnerability	Resilience
Low self-esteem	High Self-esteem
Lack of control	Appropriate control
Lack of self trust	Self trust
Perfectionism	Realistic goals
Negative thoughts	Positive thoughts
People pleasing	Attention to self

Being resilient is important because it protects us against the stresses that we all experience in life. Resilience is one of the keys to positive mental health. The good news is that **resilience can be learned**.

**So, how do we become more resilient?...**

## **General Stress Management Advice**

If you would like to be able to handle life's challenges, no matter how big or small, with greater ease, to grow from adversity, and to turn potentially negative events into positive ones, the following steps can help you to become more resilient to stress (American Psychological Association).

### **Develop the Right Attitude**

Resilient people tend to view life's difficulties as challenges and respond accordingly with action, rather than with fear, self-pity, blame, or a victim mentality. While life can be very challenging, and this is often beyond our control, an important step in becoming more resilient is to develop positive self-talk and to remind yourself that you are strong and can grow stronger and more wise as you handle life's challenges. The sections on Cognitive Behaviour Therapy and Neuro-Linguistic Programming later in this booklet describe some of the ways in which you can learn to do this.

### **Accentuate the positive**

Positive thinking helps to refocus the negative to be positive. Although this may seem to be an obvious statement it is indeed the case that a person's reaction to a perceived threat can have positive outcomes, forcing the individual to develop a new and different perspective perhaps involving more rewarding patterns of behaviour. Focusing on the positive is an old but extremely useful tactic for people. It requires being positive on two fronts: about ourselves, first and foremost, and about the world at large. Although the world is full of negative things, if we focus our attention on these things and dwell on them, we miss the truth that the world is also full of opportunity and good things too. Positive people believe that disruptions are part of everyday life, are part for the course and are not a major crisis.

### **Avoid Seeing Crises as Insurmountable Problems**

You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Try looking beyond the present to how future circumstances may be a little better. Note any subtle ways in which you might already feel somewhat better as you deal with difficult situations. Keep things in perspective. Even when facing very painful events, try to consider the stressful situation in a broader context and keep a long-term perspective. Avoid blowing the event out of proportion.

### **Move towards your goals**

Develop some realistic goals. Do something regularly – even if it seems like a small accomplishment – that enables you to move toward your goals. Instead of focusing on tasks that seem unachievable or overwhelming, ask yourself, “What's one thing I



know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?”

### **Develop an Internal Locus of Control**

Resilient people believe that *they* are in control of their lives, and this is true. While we often can't control our circumstances, we *can* control how we respond to those circumstances, and this makes a big difference to our attitudes and to the course our lives take. It is important to realise that you always have a choice to change your situation. Even if you don't like the choices available at the moment and even if the only change you can make is in your attitude, it is important to realise and acknowledge that you always have some choices.

### **Cultivate Optimism**

Being an optimist is more than simply looking on the bright side of life (though this does help). It is a way of viewing the world where you maximize your strengths and accomplishments and minimise your weaknesses and setbacks. Developing a more optimistic world view can help you to become more resilient. By maintaining an optimistic outlook you can enable yourself to expect that good things will happen in your life. Try visualising what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear.

### **Social Support Networks**

While we ultimately face our own challenges in life, a supportive friend or group of friends or family can help to lighten the load. Good relationships with close family members, friends, or others are important. Accepting help and support from those who care about you and will listen to you strengthens resilience. Those with strong networks of social support tend to stay healthier and happier throughout life, and tend to cope better with stress. On the other hand, those with little support may find themselves more vulnerable while those with unsupportive relationships tend to fare even worse ([stress.about.com](http://stress.about.com)).

### **Exercise**

Exercise has been correlated with stronger levels of resilience. This may be due to the effects of endorphins on one's mood, or the physical health benefits to those who exercise, or a combination of both. As stress evokes a physiological fight or flight response it may be useful to actively engage in physical activity in order to reduce tension and anxiety. It is recommended that physical exercise is most rewarding and sustainable as a lifestyle choice where it revolves around a fun social activity. There is a seemingly endless list of activities that can get you more active; the key is to find something that you enjoy!

Exercise can be a good way of dealing with stress. It reduces the levels of adrenaline released by pressure or anger, produces 'good mood' substances in the brain, leads

to a sense of well-being and relaxation and encourages deep sleep. The level of exercise should take into account the age and physical condition of the individual.

### **Nutrition**

Nutrition is also an important part of maintaining a well-balanced and enjoyable life style. When we become stressed and anxious we are less inclined to attend to our health needs. Developing a routine involving healthy eating and exercise can improve self-esteem and self-confidence in addition to the obvious benefits to physical health.

### **However...**

While it is important to address stress and anxiety through lifestyle choices and changing negative patterns of behaviour, it is important to differentiate between stress maintenance techniques as described above and the development of more sustainable and deeper emotional learning required to increase our resilience against life stress. The following sections will describe some of the most popular approaches to altering the way in which we think about situations and the stresses of life and, in turn, increasing resilience.

# Cognitive Behavioural Techniques

*"People are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them"*  
Epictetus (c.50-138 AD).

Cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) are among the most effective ways of reducing stress (University of Maryland Medical Centre). CBT used for stress rests on the premise that it is not simply the events in our lives that cause us stress, it is the way we think about them. For example, two people may be stuck in a traffic jam. While one person could view this situation as an opportunity to listen to music or get lost in thought and become relaxed, another person may focus on the wasted time or the feeling of being trapped, and become distressed. There are endless examples of how our thoughts and our negative self-talk colour our experiences and can lead to a triggered stress response or, alternatively, a calm demeanour. One of the biggest challenges for most people is their negative self-talk. We tend to be very self-critical, whereas positive self-talk should become a daily habit.

Some things are within our control, and some things are not. It is only after you have accepted this fundamental rule, and learned to distinguish between what you can and cannot control, that inner tranquillity and outer effectiveness become possible. Strange as it may seem at first, it is our own attitudes and reactions that give us the most trouble. We cannot always choose our external circumstances, but we can choose how to respond to them. CBT does not necessarily aim to solve every problem in your life. Instead, it aims to teach you the skills so you can solve your own problems now, and in the future. CBT focuses mostly on the 'here and now' and particularly on the way you think about things. CBT works by helping you identify where your thoughts (and actions) are unhelpful and self-defeating. Once aware of these issues, CBT can help you to replace these negative thoughts and 'bad habits' with more helpful thoughts and more constructive behaviours.

CBT can be very empowering, helping us to take control over our thoughts, rather than allowing our thoughts to control us. CBT provides valuable skills and techniques to observe our thought patterns and begin the process of retraining them, enabling us to correct any negative thought habits or misinterpretations we may have that make the effects of stress, depression, etc, worse.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) is a way of talking about how you think about yourself, the world and other people. It is also a way of talking about how what you do affects your thoughts and feelings (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2005). CBT can help you to change how you think (cognitive) and what you do (behaviour). These changes can help you to feel better. Instead of focusing on the causes of your

distress in the past, it looks for ways to improve our state of mind now. It involves recognising distorted thinking and learning to replace it with more realistic substitute ideas. The goal of CBT is accurate and rational thinking – the kind that is based as much as possible on logic and available facts.

The central insight of CBT is that thoughts mediate between stimuli, such as external events, and emotions. A stimulus elicits a thought – which may be an evaluative judgement of some kind – and this in turn gives rise to an emotion. In other words, it is not the stimulus *itself* that somehow elicits an emotional response directly but our evaluation of our thought about that stimulus (MacKay, 2007).

Two additional assumptions underpin the approach of CBT:

1. people are capable of becoming aware of their own thoughts and of changing them
2. sometimes the thoughts elicited by stimuli distort or otherwise fail to reflect reality accurately. (MacKay 2007).

Our self talk, the internal dialogue that runs in our heads, interpreting, explaining, and judging the situations we encounter, can actually make things seem better or worse, threatening or non-threatening, stressful or not... Some people tend to see things in a more positive light, and others tend to view things more negatively, putting themselves at a disadvantage in life.

### How can CBT help?

CBT can help you to make sense of overwhelming problems by breaking them down into smaller parts. This makes it easier to see how they are connected and how they affect you. These parts are:

- A situation – a problem, event or difficult situation  
From this can follow:
- Thoughts
- Emotions
- Physical feelings
- Actions

Each of these areas can affect the others. How you think about a problem can affect how you feel physically and emotionally. It can also alter what you do about it. There are helpful and unhelpful ways of reacting to most situations, depending on how you think about them. This is illustrated in the table below:

**Situation:** You've had a bad day, feel fed up, so you go out shopping. As you walk down the road, someone you know walks by and, apparently, ignores you.

	UNHELPFUL	HELPFUL
Thoughts	He/she ignored me – they don't like me	He/she looks a bit wrapped up in themselves – I wonder if there's something wrong
Emotional feelings	Low, sad and rejected	Concerned for the other person
Physical	Stomach cramps, low energy, feel sick	None – feel comfortable
Action	Go home and avoid them	Get in touch to make sure they're ok.

Source: Royal College of Psychiatrists

The same situation has led to two very different results, depending on how you thought about the situation. How you think has affected how you felt and what you did. In the example, in the left hand column, you've jumped to a conclusion without very much evidence for it, and this matters because it has led to:

- A number of uncomfortable feelings
- An unhelpful behaviour

CBT can help you to break this vicious circle of altered thinking, feelings and behaviour. When you see the parts of the sequence clearly, you can change them – and therefore change the way you feel.

## **The 'Behaviour' component of CBT**

### **Break it into manageable pieces**

We have seen how the way we think impacts on the way we feel, and how these, in turn, impact on our behaviour. When we are faced with a 'stressful' situation, be it at work or at home, we can often feel that the problem is too large or overwhelming to cope with. This can result in people avoiding the issue and seeing the problem as too difficult to deal with. The answer, according to CBT, is to break the problem down into smaller, more manageable chunks. If we use the analogy provided by Chris Williams ([www.livinglifetothefull.com](http://www.livinglifetothefull.com)), we can ask ourselves, "How would we eat an elephant?" The answer is you eat an elephant by breaking it down into bite-sized chunks. It may take some time to eat the whole thing and you may have to freeze

some pieces and eat them next month; but if we break it down into small enough pieces, everyone can eat an elephant. This approach can be used when faced with any kind of difficult or challenging situation.

### **Some important points to remember...**

#### **What is the worst that could happen?**

It is important to realise that what you predict will happen, especially if you are emotionally aroused at the time you make your prediction, will usually prove to be more extreme than what actually happens. While this “outcome shrinkage” can also apply to positive predictions, the effect, especially if you have an anxious tendency, is more pronounced with negative predictions. Things will usually work out better than you imagine.

#### **The ‘spotlight’ effect**

You are vulnerable to what is known as the ‘spotlight effect’ – a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which people’s attention is focused on you, together with a distorted idea of how they are judging you and your behaviour, how much they will remember of what you did, and whether they care how well or badly you performed. A companion bias to the spotlight effect is an unflattering and often inaccurate appraisal of your own abilities and performance.

#### **The way we remember something, may not actually be what happened**

Memory is selective and subject to many distortions. It is not a simple, unadorned record of past events. When you remember something, it’s not like playing a tape that perfectly recreates the original experience. Instead, your brain constructs a scenario of the occurrence using incomplete and sometimes incorrect information, filling in the gaps with assumptions about what ‘must have happened’ and is influenced by the effects of such factors as hindsight, the mood you were in at the time of the original events, the mood you are in at the time you summon up the memory, and other common biases. In short, it can easily be like a historical novel or movie – some fact and some fiction.

### **Cognitive distortions and stress**

Virtually all of the thought patterns that negatively impact our experiences can be categorised into one of ten common cognitive distortions. In order to become more resilient to stress, we need to learn to recognise and alter these habitually negative thought patterns. When you think about your life, it is quite possible that your mind is playing tricks on you that can distort your view. Cognitive distortions – where your mind puts a ‘spin’ on the events you see, and attaches a not-so-objective

interpretation to what you experience – happen all the time.

When you know what to be on the lookout for, it becomes relatively easy to spot the cognitive distortions in others. It may be a little more challenging to spot your own, but it is possible. Doing so can bring lasting positive change in the way you experience stressors in your life.

### **The 10 most common cognitive distortions**

Here are the 10 most common cognitive distortions, with examples of how they relate to stress. You may recognise one or two of them as familiar to you – if, over the next few days, you look for them and actively correct them, you will be well on your way to increasing your resilience to the daily stress in your life.

(Source: Burns, David, M.D. *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. Avon Books: New York).

#### **All-or-Nothing Thinking**

This type of distortion is the culprit when people think in extremes, with no grey areas or middle ground. All-or-nothing thinkers often use words like "always" and "never" when describing things. "I always get stuck in traffic!" "My boss never listens to me!" This type of thinking can magnify the stressors in your life, making them seem like bigger problems than they may, in reality, be.

#### **Overgeneralization**

Those prone to overgeneralization tend to take isolated events and assume that all future events will be the same. For example, an 'over-generaliser' who faces a rude sales assistant may start believing that all sales assistants are rude and that shopping will always be a stressful experience.

#### **Mental Filter**

Those who use mental filtering as their distortion of choice tend to gloss over positive events and hold a magnifying glass to the negative. Ten things can go right, but a person operating under the influence of a mental filter may only notice the one thing that goes wrong. (Add a little overgeneralization and all-or-nothing thinking to the equation, and you have a recipe for stress.)

#### **Disqualifying the Positive**

Similar to mental filtering, those who disqualify the positive tend to treat positive events like flukes, thereby clinging to a more negative world view and set of low expectations for the future. If you have ever tried to help a friend solve a problem, only to have every solution you pose shot down with a "Yeah but..." response, you have witnessed this cognitive distortion firsthand.

### Jumping to Conclusions

People do this one all the time. Rather than letting the evidence bring them to a logical conclusion, they set their sights on a conclusion (often negative), and then look for evidence to back it up, ignoring evidence to the contrary. The kid who decides that everyone in his new class will hate him, and 'knows' that they're only acting nice to him in order to avoid punishment, is jumping to conclusions. Conclusion-jumpers can often fall prey to mind reading (where they believe that they know the true intentions of others without talking to them) and fortune telling (predicting how things will turn out in the future and believing these predictions to be true).

### Magnification and Minimization

Similar to mental filtering and disqualifying the positive, this cognitive distortion involves placing a stronger emphasis on negative events and downplaying the positive ones. The customer service representative who only notices the complaints of customers and fails to notice positive interactions is a victim of magnification and minimization. Another form of this distortion is known as **catastrophizing**, where one imagines and then expects the worst possible scenario. This type of cognitive distortion can lead to a lot of stress.

### Emotional Reasoning

This one is closely linked to jumping to conclusions in that it involves ignoring certain facts when drawing conclusions. Emotional reasoners will consider their emotions about a situation as evidence rather than objectively looking at the facts. "I'm feeling completely overwhelmed, therefore my problems must be completely beyond my ability to solve them," or, "I'm angry with you; therefore, you must be in the wrong here," are both examples of faulty emotional reasoning. Acting on these beliefs as fact can, understandably, contribute to even more problems to solve.

### Should Statements

Those who rely on 'should statements' tend to have rigid rules, set by themselves or others, that always need to be followed – at least in their minds. They don't see flexibility in different circumstances, and they put themselves under considerable stress trying to live up to these self-imposed expectations. If your internal dialogue involves a large number of 'shoulds,' you may be under the influence of this cognitive distortion.

### Labelling and Mislabelling

Those who label or mislabel will habitually place labels that are often inaccurate or negative on themselves and others. "He's a whiner." "She's a fake." "I'm just a useless worrier." These labels tend to define people and contribute to a one-dimensional view of them, paving the way for overgeneralisations to move in.



Labelling cages people into roles that don't always apply and prevents us from seeing people (ourselves included) as we really are.

### **Personalization**

Those who personalize their stressors tend to blame themselves or others for things over which they have no control, creating stress where it need not be. Those prone to personalization tend to blame themselves for the actions of others, or blame others for their own feelings.

The cognitive distortions illustrated above highlight the need to be sceptical of your cognitions, especially at emotional moments. In order to do this, you need to overcome the tendency when you are emotionally aroused to take your thoughts and feelings at face value even more than you normally do. One of the ways in which you can overcome your cognitive distortions is through the process of cognitive restructuring.

### **Cognitive Restructuring**

Cognitive restructuring, a process of recognizing, challenging, and changing cognitive distortions and negative thought patterns can be accomplished with the right information and commitment to change. Here are some strategies for changing negative self talk. (Source: Burns, David, M.D. *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. Avon Books: New York).

#### **Awareness Is The First Step**

Become aware of your cognitive distortions of choice. The first step in loosening the grip of cognitive distortions is to become aware of them. Once you become aware of your patterns of faulty thinking, you can begin to challenge these thoughts more and more: look for exceptions if you're an *all-or-nothing* thinker; make it a point to look for evidence and try to find alternate conclusions if you find yourself *jumping to conclusions* or practicing *emotional reasoning*. With time and practice, this type of cognitive restructuring will become second nature and challenging your negative thinking patterns, and replacing them with more positive thoughts and views will become easy. You probably don't realise how often you say negative things in your head, or how much it affects your experience. The following strategies can help you become more conscious of your internal dialogue and its content.

- **Journal writing** – whether you carry a journal around with you and jot down negative comments when you think them, write a general summary of your thoughts at the end of the day, or just start writing about your feelings on a

certain topic and later go back to analyse it for content, journaling can be an effective tool for examining your inner process.

- **Thought-stopping** – as you notice yourself saying something negative in your mind, you can stop your thought mid-stream by saying to yourself, “Stop”. Saying this aloud will be more powerful, and having to say it aloud will make you more aware of how many times you are stopping negative thoughts, and where.
- **Rubber band snap** - Another trick is to walk around with a rubber band around your wrist. As you notice negative self-talk, pull the band away from your skin and let it snap back. It will hurt a little, and serve as a slightly negative consequence that will both make you more aware of your thoughts, and help to stop them.

### **Recognize Your Power**

Studies show that people tend to get more stressed when they feel that they don't have a choice in what happens to them. In some situations, such as within the context of a job, there is very little choice. However, we can also create a choice-less reality in our minds when we fail to recognize when choices exist. Pay attention to your self talk: do you tend to say you 'have to' or 'can't' do things a lot? The statement, “I can't work out because I have to volunteer at the kids' school again,” ignores the reality that both activities are choices. Just because one choice isn't chosen doesn't mean it wasn't a choice to begin with. Changing your 'have to's and 'can't's' into 'choose to' and 'choose not to' can actually remind you that you do have choice in a situation, and help you feel less stressed. “I'd like to work out, but I choose to volunteer at the kids' school instead,” feels less confined, and sounds more fun.

### **Actively Focus on the Positive**

Often people place an inordinate level of focus on the negative, discount the positive, or fail to see the positive altogether. This leads to a world view that can seem overwhelming, and problems that feel insurmountable. When you place a focus on the positive aspects of a situation, and make peace with the negative, the situation becomes less stressful. If people are rude to you one day, go out of your way to notice the people who are neutral or polite. If things just seem to be going wrong one after another, make an effort to notice and appreciate what does go smoothly. Along these lines, many people find that keeping a gratitude journal – a daily log of things for which they are grateful – is immensely helpful in that it not only supplies a list of blessings to look over, but it trains the mind to notice these blessings throughout the day, and it affects their whole experience of stress.

### Stay In The Here And Now

When dealing with a problem, try focusing on what's happening right now, without projecting into the future or dredging up the past; it keeps you dealing with what's going on now. For example, interpersonal conflicts are often complicated by past grievances, and when people focus on not only what's happening now, but on all the previous times they've been angry at each other, and project into the future that things will never change, their anger and frustration sharply escalates. Try to stay in the present, the specific problem, and finding a solution that works. This can effectively help you deal with a variety of stressors without becoming as overwhelmed.

### Replace Negative Statements

A good way to stop a bad habit is to replace it with something better. Once you are aware of your internal dialogue, here are some ways to change it:

- **Milder wording** – have you ever noticed that, in hospitals, nurses often talk about 'discomfort' rather than 'pain'? This is generally done because 'pain' is a much more powerful word, and discussing your 'pain' level can actually make your experience of it more intense than if you are discussing your 'discomfort' level (stress.about.com). You can try this strategy in your daily life. In your self-talk, turning more powerful negative words to more neutral words can actually help to neutralise your experience. Instead of using words like 'hate' and 'angry' you can use words like 'don't like' and 'annoyed'.
- **Change negative to neutral or positive** – as you find yourself mentally complaining about something, rethink your assumptions. Are you assuming something is a negative event when it isn't, necessarily? For example, having your plans cancelled at the last minute can be seen as a negative, but what you do with your newly-freed time can be what you make of it. The next time you find yourself stressing about something or deciding you're not up to a challenge, stop and rethink, and see if you can come up with a neutral or positive replacement.
- **Change self-limiting statements to questions** – self-limiting statements like "I can't handle this!" or "This is impossible!" are particularly damaging because they increase your stress in a given situation and they stop you from searching for solutions. The next time you find yourself thinking something that limits the possibilities of a given situation, turn it into a question. "How can I handle this?" or "How is this possible?" sound considerably more hopeful and open up your imagination to new possibilities.

You can also begin the process of changing automatic, negative thoughts by asking yourself the following questions

- a. What evidence do I have for this thought? Is there any alternative way of looking at the situation? Is there any alternative explanation?

- b. How would someone else think about the situation? Would your thoughts be accepted as correct by other people?
- c. Are my judgements based on how I felt rather than what I did? (e.g. you felt anxious but acted appropriately)
- d. Am I setting myself unrealistic or unobtainable standards?
- e. Am I forgetting relevant facts or over-focusing on irrelevant facts?
- f. Am I thinking in all or nothing terms? Is the problem really as bad as you seem to think it is?
- g. Am I over-estimating how responsible I am for the way things work out? Am I over-estimating how much control I have?
- h. What if it happens? What would be so bad about that?
- i. How are you going to think about this in 6 months time?
- j. Am I over-estimating how likely an event is?
- k. Am I under-estimating what I can do to deal with the problem/situation?

Through adopting the techniques and approaches illustrated above, in time, it is possible to replace your negative thoughts with more helpful, positive thoughts, which in turn will make you more resilient to the stresses of everyday life. It may take some time to change your 'thought habits'; However, once you have mastered the techniques, the approach can impact positively on every aspect of your life.

# Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine it is April 14th; you just realized your taxes are not done, and your computer just crashed with no backup. Your boss is on the phone and wants to see you in his office now. As you vividly create these images in your mind notice how you feel. Become aware of your body, your breathing, and your heart rate. How does your chest and stomach feel? Now imagine crossing the street as a truck comes barrelling down on you from nowhere, horn blaring and bigger than life. Notice your internal experience. At times these reactions can be resourceful and life saving, but at other times they can be very damaging. The process your mind goes through in both cases is based on the most positive of intentions: survival. Fear is one of the most powerful motivators, yet it is also one of the most damaging stressors in life. It can be both resourceful and non-resourceful. (Source: John C Goodman, NLP Centre for Internal Change).

## What is Neuro-Linguistic Programming?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a basis for describing communicating thought processes. It is a way of looking at the feelings, values and beliefs which create behaviour. NLP can help you to:

- Gain control of your life
- Learn to motivate yourself
- Remove limiting or negative belief systems
- Release past emotions
- Visualise your future and make it happen
- Understand the territory of your mind
- Change your behaviour, enabling you to cope with any situation be it negative, stressful, involve feelings of guilt or depression, in a more positive manner.

NLP came about in the early 1970s when Richard Bandler (mathematician, computer expert and psychotherapist) and John Grinder (linguist) posed the question, "*what is it that makes the difference between somebody who is merely competent at any given skill, and somebody who excels at the same skills?*"

NLP, among other things, is the study of the structure of subjective experience, the modelling of excellence and the art of modelling. NLP provides a number of excellent tools and concepts to empower individuals to cope with or change non-resourceful or negative stress to resourceful or positive resources. NLP aims to teach people to change overwhelming, immobilising feelings into powerful motivating forces.

NLP suggests that an individual's behaviour can be changed by simply using specific language and by regularly updating a person's mental territory. NLP allows people to change, eliminate, or adopt behaviours as they see fit, and provides skills to maintain a desired emotional, physical or mental state by teaching them to grow from their life experiences. Understanding our mental territory can help us understand and improve the way we are or adjust to our experiences. We all use different mechanisms to understand and perceive the world as it is shown to us. The way we each see life differs from everyone else, so the way we handle life experiences will, of course, differ as well. Understanding how our mind functions and makes coping decisions allows us to change negative or inappropriate actions or responses that fail to get us our desired result ([www.depressionet.com.au](http://www.depressionet.com.au)).

Most people will be familiar with the internal arguing voices saying such things as “I must do...but I should do...I should not have done...I ought to...” Clearly, there is no positive correlation between the amount of time spent on or the intensity of worrying or feeling guilty and achieving your desired outcomes. On the contrary, the energy spent on worrying could be used to complete a task is being redirected away from action into inaction. NLP offers the skills to have our various parts working together as a united front through life's challenges.

One form of non-resourceful stress comes from those internal and at times external voices, which tell us we “should have...” “shouldn't have...” “ought to...”, etc. Whether we “should” upon ourselves, or let others “should” upon us, we often find ourselves knee deep in “should” (John Goodman, NLP Centre for Internal Change). Being a “should-head” does not only take up time and energy, but in some cases totally immobilizes us from taking action at all. This can result in us feeling overwhelmed or stuck and can cause us to isolate, withdraw, or avoid situations.

## **Levels of Logic**

We experience stress on different levels. Below is an adapted version of Robert Dilts' model of the levels of logic to the concept of stress.

### **Environment**

What external events trigger your feelings/reactions of stress? Do you have control over these events? If you don't have control or influence over the situation then all the worry, fear and anxiety in the world will not change them. You need to redirect that energy into something you do have control over, like your perception and reaction to the events. What resources does your environment offer to deal with stress? Knowing what options are available can be very empowering and create a sense of control.

### **Behaviour**

How do you create your experience of negative stress? Examine your actions, thoughts, and feelings. Become aware of how distorted many of your thoughts may be. Having someone point them out to you may help. Notice the feedback your body offers you (true biofeedback). NLP offers ways to transform your non-resourceful behaviours, thoughts and feelings into resourceful ones, reducing or eliminating stress from your association to that event. Remember a time when you felt relaxed and in control. Notice what was subjectively different about that experience, e.g. a time when an event triggered motivation and not debilitation. Now move those positive resources into a situation, which in the past you felt stressed about. Notice how your feelings change, do you see new options, do you feel different now about that event. Take what works well for you in one part of your life and bring it into a part that will benefit from those positive resources. Remember, the more flexibility you have the more options you realise and the more control you have.

### **Capability**

Notice your abilities and resources and use them to your advantage. Not everyone has the ability to create vivid images and mental movies of what could go wrong; to repeatedly find new things to worry about; and the skill to not only anticipate negative outcomes but to internally live them before the event ever occurs. Not everyone can trigger their fight or flight response and their autonomic and sympathetic nervous systems to kick into survival mode in non-life threatening situations. Just imagine what you can do with such powerful skills to feel calm, confident, or in control. For example you could vividly create a movie or picture in your mind of the desired outcome you want and put yourself in that scene. Actually be in that scene, experiencing it fully with all of your senses. Feel how it feels. Notice the difference in your neurology.

### **Beliefs and values**

Our beliefs and values are key factors in determining what we allow to cause us stress. This is why one person will feel overwhelmed while another will feel challenged. Our beliefs influence our behaviours/actions and our identity/self. They are the lens and filter that colour our world, magnify, minimize, or eliminate certain observations or information in our world. We distort reality to fit our belief system. Examples of distorted thought patterns include over generalizing a single incident and assuming it will always happen or be true, thinking in extremes: all or nothing thinking, or over personalizing things, to name but a few. Research shows that beliefs, which increase ones sense of control, both internal and external, reduce stress. The greater the belief you can handle a situation the less negative stress will impact you. Our beliefs can also allow us to view the world with optimism and passion, so why not distort with a positive bias? If we change our beliefs our behaviours will change too.

## **Identity**

Stress is a combination of emotions, beliefs, behaviours, and physical reactions. It is not who you are! Notice how it feels when you say; "I am stressed out," "I am overwhelmed," "I am depressed," "I am going crazy." Now add, "I feel," before these statements. The impact feels very different. "I am" makes it part of your identity. "I feel" keeps it on a behavioural level. When we think and speak on an identity level we associate into it. We also may create self-fulfilling prophecies. Keeping those messages on a feeling level allows us to disassociate from it. It is easier to change behaviours than our identity.

## **Applying NLP to Stress Reduction**

Following is an example, given by John Goodman from the NLP Centre for Internal Change, of how to apply NLP strategies for stress management:

First remember an image of a time when you felt the way you would like to feel now. If you have difficulty finding it in your past then create it by vividly recalling a person, picture or a scene from a movie or book, a song, piece of music or sound which represents the way you would like to feel. You may find yourself in a state of peace, relaxation, calm, self-control, contentment, safety, or whatever is most useful for you. You will know when you are there. Notice what happens when you move it closer, make it brighter, bigger, or more vivid. Experiment until you have created an optimal experience. If this representation were a colour what colour would it be? Notice how you feel when you surround yourself, both inside and out with this colour. Experiment and have fun with it. This colour is yours to use whenever you desire to feel that way.

## **Taking Over the Controls**

Now for a moment picture in front of you a scene of a time when you felt a little stressed out. Notice what happens when you move that image closer and make it bigger for a few seconds. Now move it back where it was. Now move it back, even further and notice how it feels. What has happened to the size of it? Make it even smaller now. How is that? Has the distance changed? Do you feel different now?

## **This is only a test**

Now choose a scene where you felt more stress (knowing you can have that scene disappear if it feels too uncomfortable, just by picturing your resource colour, sending the image away or focusing on the positive scene). See how far you can comfortably move that picture away from you. Notice what happens to the size. How do you feel now? Notice what happens when you make it smaller. Do not force the change. Just let it happen. How much further can you move it away from you now? Alternate between moving it further away and shrinking it. If at anytime that image does not appear to fully cooperate with you then try putting a filter or a gel of your resource



colour between you and the scene. You can actually add the colour into the scene by pouring it over the scene, colouring any unpleasant part of the scene, or whatever works for you. Some people find their stress disappears from the scene by adding music to the image. Motivating, calming, or humorous music often works well. You may find you can send what was stress into space or make it so small it disappears. Some people find it turns into something positive and decide to keep the new representation. If you do remove the stress altogether, replace it with your resource colour.

### **Using your mind for a change**

NLP provides many empowering tools for existing optimally in our stressful world. Remember, when you used to think you were stressed and anxious? You used to say to yourself "I am stressed or anxious" now you can realize that you only felt stressed or anxious, it was only a set of thoughts (mental behaviours), feelings (emotional behaviours) and actions (physical behaviours). It is easier to change your behaviours than your identity. In coping it is up to you to use your mind for a change, positively.

## Person Centred Theory

The following is a relatively brief summation of a 'Person Centred' approach to becoming a more fully functioning and emotionally robust individual.

Carl Rogers, a prominent psychologist developed the theory that all individuals are basically psychologically healthy and have a built in motivation to develop to their fullest potential. Rogers refers to this as the 'actualising tendency'. According to this theory, mental health difficulties can be conceived of as a consequence of this natural tendency being distorted or compromised in some way. In our modern environment we are subject to many and various demands. These demands do not always meet with our expectations and can sometimes compromise our sense of identity (sense of self). When this happens we have a tendency to develop defensive behaviours. Rogers identified these defensive behaviours as arising out of anxiety and involving:

- Denial of the perceived threat and removal from conscious awareness
- Perceptual Distortion involving a reinterpretation of the situation so that it appears less threatening

It is suggested that the habitual use of defence mechanisms puts a greater distance between the real and the ideal self. Hence the individual finds him/herself in more and more threatening situations, develops greater and greater levels of anxiety, and uses more defences. To varying degrees we all use defence mechanisms to accommodate and achieve a sense of balance in what can be a very demanding and stressful social environment. According to Roger's theory he describes the fully functioning or psychologically healthy person as displaying the following qualities:

Openness to experience: This is the opposite of defensiveness. It is the accurate perception of one's experiences of the world including feelings. According to Roger's theory it is impossible to grow as a person (actualising tendency) if we are not aware of our feelings and what we truly want from life.

Existential Living: Rogers describes this as the importance of attending to the here and now rather than negatively dwelling on the past or investing all our hopes and aspirations in a preferred future. This does not mean that we should not learn from past experiences or plan for the future. It simply means that we should not do so to the detriment of our ongoing experience of the present.

Organismic Living: This means that we should value what comes right and feels most natural to us. It is Rogers' contention that if the individual is aware of his / her true

feelings and potential he/she will grow as a person in a socially responsible and thoughtful manner.

Creativity: Rogers contends that if you feel free and responsible then you will contribute toward your own personal growth, the environment and that of others around you. This can be achieved through creativity whether that involves art, science or social concern for friends and family.

From a Person Centred perspective, what we conceive of as stress arises from the distance between our 'real self' and our 'ideal self'. It follows from this perspective that we should actively try to develop a realistic and positive sense of ourselves in order to reduce levels of stress and anxiety. A positive sense of self underlies what we commonly refer to as self esteem. The following are strategies for building self-esteem.

### **Strategies for Building Self- Esteem**

Try to live according to what is possible and what feels right for you as opposed to dwelling on perceived failures in the past. The tendency to dwell on perceived failure can distract us from identifying and fulfilling our own needs abilities, interests and personal goals.

Recognise and take care of your own personal needs as they arise. This is not contrary to our social roles as mother, husband wife. In order to nurture and sustain others we must firstly nurture and sustain ourselves.

Set realistic and achievable goals and work gradually to achieve your potential.

Learn to talk to yourself positively. In order to be loving, forgiving and accepting of others we need to learn to become loving, forgiving and accepting of ourselves.

Develop the habit of testing your reality and learn to separate emotional reactions from habitual fears and bad feelings borne out of defensiveness and self-deception.

Try to think in a rational, measured way in order to counteract negative feelings and emotions.

Allow yourself to experience success by taking on projects or goals that are attainable without being overwhelming or unreasonable.

Be willing to take chances, as all new experiences are potential learning experiences, which may help to build self-confidence. Expect to make mistakes and feel good

about the fact that you had the courage to try something new.

Accept the fact that you have problems in life and do not try to constantly avoid problems. If you constantly run from your problems then it will erode your self-confidence.

Get in the habit of making positive decisions in a flexible but firm manner and trust yourself to deal with the consequences. When you assert yourself, you enhance your sense of self, you learn more about yourself and you increase your self-confidence.

Learn to rely on your own opinion of yourself. It is good to listen to feedback from others but don't become totally dependant on their opinions. Trust in your own values when making decisions and deciding how you feel about yourself and what is right for you to do. No one knows you as well as you do.

## **Solution Focused Approaches**

There is a vast amount of information coming into us in any given moment. More than we can possibly contain. We filter this information (and thereby assign meaning to it) through our attitudes, moods, perceptions, beliefs, values, and other criteria. We use this filtered information to construct maps or models of reality. In our ongoing experience, we don't operate in the world directly; we operate within our maps - our understanding of the world and what the events around us mean to us. By examining and reconstructing our maps, we can change our experiences of reality.

A solution focused approach lends itself to building on peoples' resilience as it contributes significantly to identifying your resources, strengths and abilities and works within your own belief systems and goals.

Solution Focused approaches are based on the idea that, if our aim is to change our 'maps', we ought to use things related to how change happens rather than concentrating on how problems develop. Understanding the details and 'cause' of the problem is often not necessary to finding a solution. The important issues are:

- How do you want things to be different? and
- What will it take to make it happen?

### **Focus on what you want to be different**

The first step in the solution-focused change process is usually to focus on what you want to change and why you want to change that. There may be two kinds of desire for change: 1) there is something negative you want to get rid of (a problem) and 2) there is something positive you want more of (an unfulfilled aspiration). Ask questions like "What would I like to be different?" "What is it I would like to change?" and "What is the reason I want things to be different?". A remarkable aspect of the solution-focused approach is that you skip problem analysis and diagnosis. Analysing why the problem exists and who is responsible for causing the problems are not part of the approach. Instead, you take the shortest route to the desired outcomes.

### **Outcomes desired are made specific**

Next, you focus your attention on specifying how you want things to be. When people start formulating how they want things to be different, they often become excited and hopeful. By focusing on specific positive goals, the change process has actually begun. Envisioning a clear and entailed picture of how things will be when things are better creates hope and expectation and makes solutions possible. Solution Focused approaches focus on the future (and how it will be better when things change) and majors on the establishing and elaboration of clear goals.

Goals direct the change process and help it remain focused and brief (if we don't know where we're going, we don't know when we've got there!). Solution Focused approaches also focus on your strengths and resources, as a way of helping you recognize how to use your resources to bring about changes. The focus is on what you would like to achieve rather than on the problem or stressors. Ask yourself questions such as:

- How would you like things to be different?
- What do you want to achieve?
- What will be different when the change has succeeded?
- What will you do differently?
- What advantages will this have?

### **Describe results already realised**

The third step is to look at what is already there. It is like looking at the glass half full. This can give you new energy and hope. People tend to overlook what has already been achieved and when they rediscover what is already working well, they often become more optimistic and hopeful. Another useful tactic is to identify specific situations in the past in which things have already gone better. This might involve an exception to the problem or an earlier success. When you have identified such a situation, you answer questions like:

- What went right in this situation?
- What was different in this situation?
- What was your own role in this success?

### **One step forward**

Then, attention shifts to taking action by looking at how earlier success is useful for the current situation. This is sometimes called *building a bridge between successes in the past to success in the future*. You focus on taking one small step forward instead of attempting to take a giant leap. After then small step forward has been taken, focus your attention on what goes better. This purposeful improvement-focus helps you to notice positive changes, even small ones. Noticing that you are moving forward is supportive to making further change.

### **Desire for further change is made explicit.**

A next step is to ask specifically what further change is desired. Doing this allows you check your motivation for further change and to adjust you goals, if necessary. The benefits of frequently asking what further change you want are threefold: 1) motivational: by remembering why you want things to be different you re-inject new motivation for change, 2) fine-tuning: it allows you to fine-tune your goals by taking into account new things that have happened, or new insights you may have gained, 3) efficiency: it keeps you from doing too much.

### Some important assumptions

- You are the expert
- The 'problem' is the problem; it is separate from the person
- If it works, do more of it; if it doesn't work, do something different.
- The possibilities are infinite
- Everyone has within them a wealth of resources
- Change is inevitable and is happening all the time
- Once you know what to do, do more of it
- Understanding the cause of the problem is not always necessary or useful
- There are always exceptions to the problem; there are always times when the problem is less severe or absent.
- A small change in any aspect of a problem or failed solution can initiate solution
- Language shapes and moulds our perception of reality
- A focus on the problem is not necessary to make progress

### Applying Solution Focused Approaches to Stress Management

- Acknowledge the problem and its effect
- Set goals
- Redefine the problem in a solvable way – identify times when the problem is not a problem and acknowledge competencies and strengths
  - When have you had success?
  - When have things been a little bit better?
  - What was different?
  - What helped?
  - When didn't you have the problem? What was different?
- Envisage solutions – use the Miracle Question – what would be happening if the problem had gone when you woke up tomorrow? Describe a range of situations without the problem
- Identify small steps to solutions – identify a small sign which will indicate a move in the right direction

When people start applying the solution-focused approach, it can be challenging. You have to learn new skills, mainly in asking helpful questions. In addition, you have to unlearn some things. You leave certain very familiar things out when you work solutions-based, like analysing problems, finding out who is to blame, and looking primarily at what is not right. When you manage to learn these new skills, however, the advantages can be great.

## Relaxation Techniques

The benefits of relaxation techniques on our physical being are fairly well known, for example: lower blood pressure, greater blood flow to the muscles, fewer tension headaches, less nausea and more restful sleep. The mental benefits include an ability to concentrate better, think more clearly, and reduce depression, anxiety, and emotional "see-sawing".

Relaxation techniques may involve prayer, meditation, journaling or simply listening to music or going for a walk in the park. The demands of our modern environment are such that we often do not get the chance to listen carefully to what our bodies are telling us. We may avoid sleep and fail to attend to minor illnesses etc. Over a period of time we can become irritable and run down. When we are feeling nervous, stressed, or anxious, our bodies are trying to tell us to relax and take it easy. The following section illustrates some examples of relaxation techniques that can be adopted when we need to take some time out to calm our bodies and minds. Regular relaxation breaks, even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, interrupt the daily accumulation of tension. They also remind you how it feels to be calm, and in so doing, create a desire to feel like this more of the time. Temporarily attaining this calmer state reminds you that you can manage your own state and do not have to be a victim of daily pressures.





## Guided Imagery

Guided Imagery can take you on a mental mini-vacation that relaxes your body and soothes your mind. Guided imagery has been found to provide significant stress reduction benefits, including physically relaxing the body quickly and efficiently, and even helping participants get in touch with deeper levels of wisdom that would help them better manage their lives in ways that would reduce stress (Elizabeth Scott, Medical Review Board). The studies demonstrating the health benefits of imagery are so numerous that many hospitals are incorporating imagery as an option to help with treatment.

With the use of an imagery CD or simply one's own imagination, it is possible for people to get into a deeply relaxed state and envision with all the senses, a relaxing scene. The following details how to undertake guided imagery ([www.stress.about.com](http://www.stress.about.com))

### Directions:

1. Get into a comfortable position.
2. Close your eyes. Take in a deep, cleansing breath, expanding your stomach and keeping your shoulders relaxed, and hold it in for the count of 6. Exhale. As you breathe, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, still expanding your stomach rather than moving your shoulders up and down. As you inhale, imagine that you are breathing in peace, and as you exhale, imagine that you are breathing out stress.
3. Once you get to a relaxed state, begin to imagine yourself amidst the most relaxing environment you can imagine. For some, this may be floating in the cool, clear waters off a remote tropical island, with soothing music playing in the background. For others, this might be sitting by a fire in a secluded snow cabin, deep in the woods, sipping hot chocolate and reading a novel, while wrapped in a plush blanket and fuzzy slippers.
4. As you imagine your scene, try to involve all your senses. What does it look like? How does it feel? What special scents are involved? Do you hear the roar of a fire, the splash of a waterfall, or the sounds of birds? Make your vision so real you can even taste it!
5. Stay here for as long as you like. Enjoy your "surroundings" and let yourself be far away from all your stresses. When you are ready to come back to reality, count back from 10, and tell yourself that when you get to one, you'll feel serene and alert, and enjoy the rest of your day. When you return, you'll feel more calm and refreshed, like returning from a holiday without having even left the room.

## Feet Breathing

This is a method of dealing with anxiety by taking a short relaxation break in which you link slower and more even breathing with mental imagery.

Using Feet Breathing enables you to take a short relaxation break whenever and wherever you wish. Relaxation/meditation is not a mysterious or mystical experience; it is a natural and valuable ability that we all possess, even though we may not have practiced the skills for many years.

Relaxation is the bed rock of effective anxiety management and with a little persistence you can quickly become skilled at it. You can use feet breathing with your eyes open or closed, in company or alone, at work, at home, while travelling on public transport, or while taking a break on a long car journey (although it is not suitable for use whilst driving).

You can also use this method to help you get to sleep at night, or if you awake during the night, to get back to sleep.

### Directions:

1. let your body relax
  - a. tense and relax your feet X5
  - b. tense and relax your legs X5
  - c. Tense and relax your torso/stomach X5
  - d. Tense and relax your arms X5
  - e. Tense and relax your chest X5
  - f. Tense and relax your face X5
2. Use 'circular' breathing – where you breathe in through your nose (3 seconds) and out slowly through your mouth (5/6 seconds)  
**Repeat this for 3 to 5 minutes**
3. As you do this, imagine that with each in-breath you are drawing the air in through the soles of your feet, up through your legs, and into your torso
4. As you let go and exhale imagine the reverse happening. The air leaving your torso, flowing down through your legs and out through the soles of your feet  
**Repeat steps 3 and 4 for 3 to 5 minutes**
5. On the in-breath silently think *I am...* and on the out-breath think *feeling calm*.  
**Repeat step 5, 5-10 times.**

## Lightstreaming Technique

Lightstreaming is another technique that can be used for relaxation. If you are guiding yourself through this approach, you will have to familiarise yourself with the steps before you begin. However, once you have learnt each of the steps, the effects of this technique can be hugely positive.

To begin with, concentrate on an upsetting/unpleasant body sensation that you may be feeling if you are stressed (e.g. this may be butterflies in your tummy, a headache, tight chest). Identify the following by asking the questions:

- If it had a shape, what would it be? (would it be round, square, oblong...)
- If it had a size, what would it be? (would it be big, small...?)
- If it had a colour what would it be?
- If it had a temperature, would it be hot or cold?
- If it had a texture, what would this be? (would it be smooth, rough, jaggy...?)
- If it had a sound, would it be high-pitched, or low?

Now, imagine some healing light coming down from above and moving in through the top of your head and this healing light is directing itself at the shape in your body. Give this wonderful healing light your favourite colour (as long as it is a different colour from the shape in your body). Decide whether this light is warm or cool.

Imagine the light coming in from above and through your head and into your body, directing itself at the shape in your body and notice how it resonates with, vibrates with it and in and around it. And just notice as it does this what happens to the shape. Continue doing this until the shape in your body has completely gone. This usually correlates with the disappearance of the upsetting feeling. After it feels better, bring the light into every portion of your body, starting with the feet and hands and moving upwards into the body until your whole body is filled with healing light.

Come back to the room and be aware at the count of 5.

## **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Progressive Muscle Relaxation, originally developed by Jacobson in 1939, is one of the most simple and easily learned techniques for relaxation. The PMR procedure teaches you to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First, you deliberately apply tension to certain muscle groups, and then you stop the tension and turn your attention to noticing how the muscles relax as the tension flows away. It is a great technique for reducing overall body tension.

### **Directions:**

1. Sit or lie down and make yourself comfortable
2. Begin by tensing all the muscles in your face. Make a tight grimace, close your eyes as tightly as possible, clench your teeth, even move your ears up if you can. Hold this for the count of eight as you inhale.
3. Now exhale, and relax completely. Let your face go completely lax, as though you were sleeping. Feel the tension seep from your facial muscles, and enjoy the feeling.
4. Next, completely tense your neck and shoulders, again inhaling and counting to eight. Then exhale and relax.
5. Continue down your body, repeating the procedure with the following muscle groups:
  - Chest
  - Abdomen
  - Entire right arm
  - Right forearm and hand (making a fist)
  - Right hand
  - Entire left arm
  - Left forearm and hand (again making a fist)
  - Left hand
  - Buttocks
  - Entire right leg
  - Lower right leg and foot
  - Right foot
  - Entire left leg
  - Lower left leg and foot
  - Left foot

For the shortened version, which includes just four main muscle groups:

- Face
- Neck, shoulders and arms
- Abdomen and chest
- Buttocks, legs and feet.

Quickly focusing on each group one after the other, with practice, you can eventually relax your body like 'liquid relaxation' poured over your head and it flowed down and completely covered you. You can then use progressive muscle relaxation to quickly de-stress any time.

## Emotional Freedom Techniques

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is a psychotherapeutic tool based on a theory that negative emotions are caused by disturbances in the body's energy field and that tapping on the meridians while thinking of a negative emotion alters the body's energy field, restoring it to 'balance'. EFT utilises energy meridians used in acupuncture – specific energy points of the neural network on which thoughts travel from the brain are stimulated by simple sequential tapping patterns, clearing away the negative energy 'stored' in these fields. Emotional distress is greatly decreased or eliminated.

EFT was created by Gary Craig in the mid 1990s, and is meant to be a simplification and improvement of Roger Callagan's Thought Field Therapy techniques. Proponents of EFT claim it relieves many psychological and physical conditions, including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, general stress, addictions, and phobias. The basic EFT technique involves holding a disturbing memory or emotion in mind and simultaneously using the fingers to tap on a series of 12 specific points on the body that correspond to meridians used in Chinese medicine.

EFT is said to be beneficial in 'treating' the following:

- Pain relief
- Fears and phobias
- Anger
- Addictions
- Anxiety
- Relationship Issues
- Trauma
- Women's Issues
- Depression
- Serious diseases
- Allergies
- Weight loss
- Respiratory problems

### The Basic EFT Recipe

4 ingredients (2 are identical)

1. the setup
2. the sequence
3. the 9 gamut procedure
4. the sequence

Once memorised, each round of the recipe can be performed in about 1 minute.

### **1. The setup**

Negative thinking, which is often outside of our awareness, will stop any attempt at healing and so it must be corrected if the rest of the basic recipe is going to work.

Repeat this affirmation 3 times...

“Even although I have this....I deeply and completely accept myself”

while rubbing the **sore spot** or tapping the **Karate Chop point**.

The blank is filled in with a brief description of the problem you want to address. For example:

*“Even though I have this fear of public speaking, I deeply and completely accept myself”.*

*“Even though I have this anger towards my father, I deeply and completely accept myself”,*

*“Even though I have these nightmares, I deeply and completely accept myself.”*

### **The sore spot (see diagram below)**

There are two sore spots and it doesn't matter which one you use. They are located in the upper left and right portions of the chest and you find them as follows:

Go to the base of the throat about where a man would knot his tie. Poke around this area and you will find a u-shaped notch at the top of your sternum (breastbone). From that notch go down 3 inches toward your navel and over 3 inches to your left (or right). If you press vigorously in that area (within a two inch radius) you will find a 'sore spot'. This is the place you will need to rub while saying the affirmation.

### **The Karate Chop point (see diagram below)**

The Karate chop point is located at the centre of the fleshy part of the outside of your hand (either hand) between the top of the wrist and the base of the baby finger. In other words, the part of the hand you would use to deliver a karate chop. Instead of rubbing it as you would the sore spot, you vigorously tap the karate chop point with the fingertips of the index finger and middle finger of the other hand.

After years of experience with both methods, it has been determined that rubbing the sore spot is a bit more effective than tapping the karate chop point. Thus, people are urged to attempt the sore spot in the first instance. However, the Karate Chop point is perfectly useful and can be used if the sore spot is inappropriate for whatever reason.

## **The Sore Spot/ Karate Chop Point**

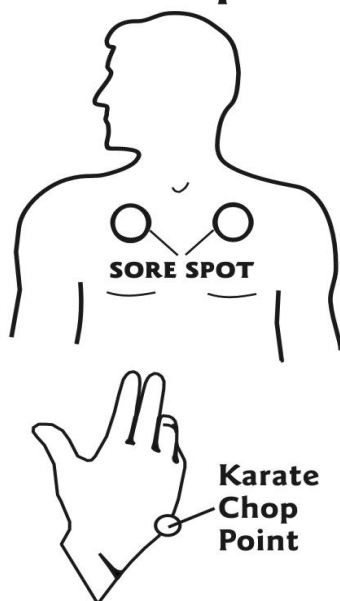


Chart reproduced courtesy of Gwenn Bonnell [www.tapintoheaven.com](http://www.tapintoheaven.com)

### **2. The sequence**

Tap about 7 times on each of the following energy points (illustrated in the diagram below) while repeating the reminder phrase at each point. The reminder phrase can be the blank that you filled in in the affirmation. Tap with either hand, but it is perhaps more convenient to do so with the dominant hand using both the index and middle finger. Tap solidly, but never so hard as to hurt or bruise.

- EB Eyebrow (beginning of the eyebrow just above and to one side of the nose)
- SE Side of eye (on the bone bordering the outside corner of the eye)
- UE Under eye (on the bone under an eye about 1 inch below your pupil)
- UN Under nose (on the small area between the bottom of your nose and top of upper lip)
- Ch Chin (midway between the point of your chin and the bottom of your lip)
- CB Collarbone (the junction where the breastbone, collarbone and first rib meet. To locate it, place your finger on the u-shaped notch at the top of the breastbone (about where a man would knot his tie). From the bottom of the U, move your forefinger down about an inch and then go to the left or right 1 inch. This is termed the CB in EFT even though it is not on the collarbone)
- UA Under arm (the side of the body at a point even with the nipple for men, or in the middle of the bra strap for women)
- BN Below nipple (for men one inch below the nipple, for ladies where the underskin of the breast meets the chest wall)



- Th Thumb (the outside edge of the thumb at a point even with the base of the thumbnail)
- IF Index Finger (the side of the index finger facing the thumb at a point even with the base of the nail)
- MF Middle finger (the side closest to the thumb at a point even with the base of the nail)
- BF Baby finger (the side closest to the thumb at a point even with the base of nail)
- KC Karate chop point (described previously)

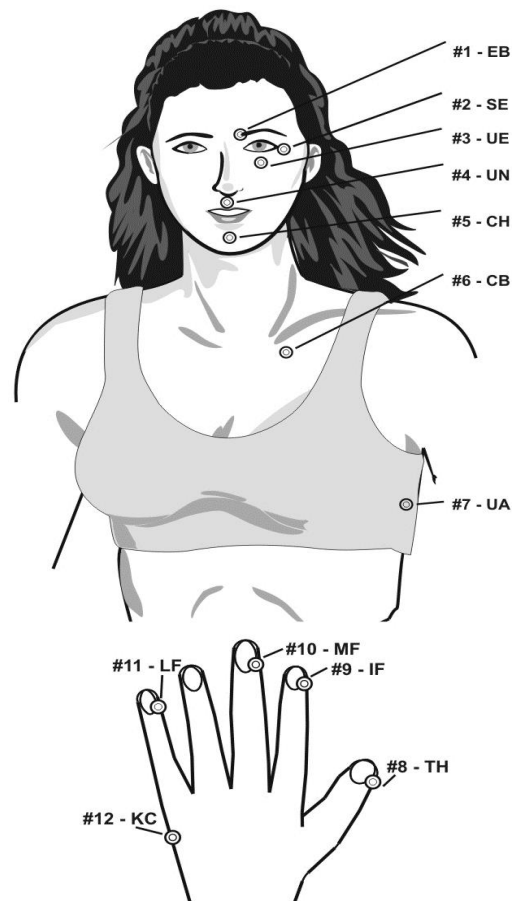


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### 3. The 9 Gamut Procedure

Continuously tap on the Gamut point (illustrated in the diagram below) while performing each of these 9 actions. The Gamut point is the back of either hand half an inch behind the midpoint between the knuckles at base of the ring and little finger.

- Eyes closed
- Eyes open
- Eyes hard down right
- Eyes hard down left
- Roll eyes in circle
- Roll eyes in other direction
- Hum 2 seconds of a song
- Count to 5
- Hum to seconds of a song

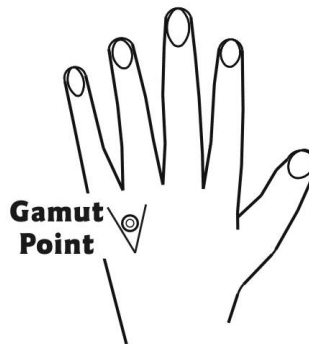


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### **4. The sequence**

Repeat the sequence (step 2 of the recipe) once again.

It is important to note that if, for example, you are using the basic recipe for some problem, sometimes the problem will simply vanish after one round, while at other times one round provides only partial relief. When only partial relief is obtained, you will need to do one or more additional rounds. Since the subconscious mind tends to be very literal, subsequent rounds of the Basic Recipe need to address the fact that you are working on the remaining problem. Thus your affirmation should be changed to:

*“Even though I **still** have **some** of this....I deeply and completely accept myself.”*