National University Polyclinics

Managing Stress:

Relaxing Your Mind and Body

NUP Allied Health – Psychology Services



What is Stress?



- Stress is a common feeling we experience in response to a challenge or demand on the brain and body.
- Stress is part of everyday life and everybody experiences some level of stress.
- There are two types of stress, namely positive stress and negative stress.

Types of Stress

Positive Stress

- Positive stress is experienced when we are able to overcome the challenges we face physically, mentally and emotionally.
- Positive stress is not necessarily bad as it gives us the drive to cope and find solutions to our problems.



Negative Stress

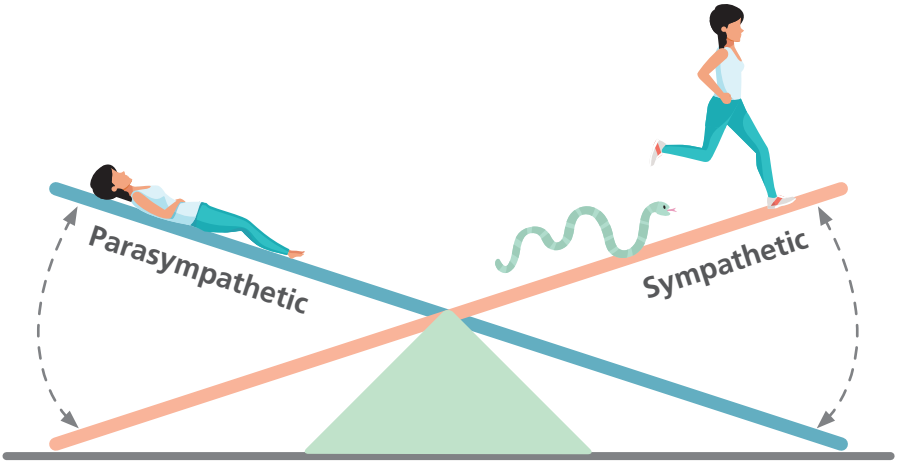
- Negative stress is experienced when we cannot cope with the challenges we face.



- Negative stress that goes on for a long time can be harmful to your health, relationships, and quality of life.

Understanding How Our Body Responds to Stress

- Our nervous system is made up of many systems and certain systems are linked to the stress response.
- The **autonomic nervous system** (ANS) has a direct role in the human body's physical response to stress and is divided into the **sympathetic nervous system** (SNS) and the **parasympathetic nervous system** (PNS).
- The two nervous systems behave like a see-saw. When one side is dominant, the other is suppressed.



Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) activates the **Relaxation Response**

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) activates the **Stress Response**

Recognising Symptoms of Stress

Physical



Muscle tension, aches or pains



Headaches



Fatigue/tiredness



Nausea



Stomach upset



Faster heart rate and/or breathing



Dizziness

Emotional



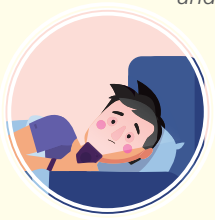
Depression and a sense of worthlessness



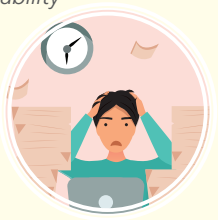
Agitation and irritability



Anxiety



Restlessness

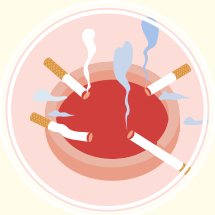


Feeling overwhelmed

Behavioural



Withdrawal from activity (social, occupational, leisure)



Smoking or excessive drinking



Being defensive and argumentative



Poor appetite or increase in appetite



Crying



Sleep problems



Avoidance



Poor productivity

Cognitive



Reduced creativity



Negative self-talk



Forgetfulness



Poor concentration



Negative attitude towards life and future



Mentally tired and preoccupied



Excessive worrying



Difficulties making decisions



Mental blocks

Common Sources of Stress

personal problems

work problems

relationship difficulties

academic pressure

health issues

financial problems

unemployment

caregiver's stress

death of loved one

NEWS

unexpected or sudden bad news

daily hassles



How Does Relaxation Help?



When you feel stressed, your body responds by releasing hormones that increase your blood pressure and raise your heart rate. This is called the stress response.

Learning how to relax helps you to relieve stress by lowering your blood pressure and heart rate. This is called the relaxation response.

Relaxation Method

There are two exercises you can do to help you relax.

- Diaphragmatic or Abdominal Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Diaphragmatic or Abdominal Breathing

You experience fast and shallow chest breathing when you are stressed. This causes the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in your body to be out of balance. If this continues for a long period of time, you may experience symptoms such as fast and/or irregular heartbeat, shortness of breath, light-headedness, weakness, and numbness.

Breathing from your diaphragm/abdomen can help balance the oxygen and carbon dioxide blood levels in your body, regulate your heart rate, and reduce muscle tension and stress. It is more relaxing as compared to shallow chest breathing.

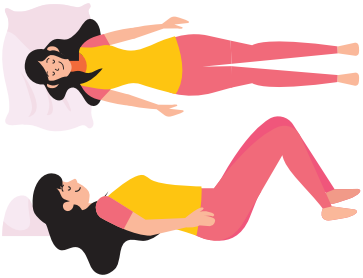
Steps for diaphragmatic breathing method:

- **Sit or lie down comfortably.**

  If you are **seated,** remember to maintain a good posture with head comfortably balanced above the spine, arms and legs uncrossed, and feet placed firmly on the floor.

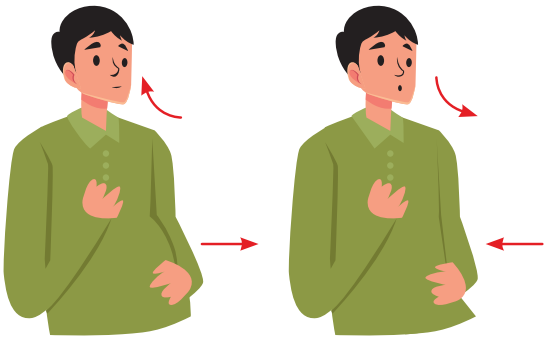


Lie down, with legs straight* and slightly apart, arms at the side and not touching your body, palms facing up, and eyes closed.



**If you have back problems, bend the knees.*

- **Breathe in slowly through your nose.** Notice how your abdomen rise as you breathe in deeply.
- **Breathe out slowly through your mouth,** as though you are breathing out through a straw. Notice how your abdomen falls when you breathe out.



- Practise diaphragmatic breathing for 5 to 10 minutes at a time, twice a day.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive relaxation of your muscles slows down your pulse rate, reduces blood pressure, as well as respiration rate. It helps you to release stress and tension in every part of your body, one muscle group at a time, which can help to calm your mind.

Steps for progressive muscle relaxation:

» Get into a comfortable position, seated or lying down, in a quiet place. Begin to relax as you take a few slow, deep breaths.

» Tense one muscle group at a time (without hurting yourself) for a few seconds, then release the tension.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

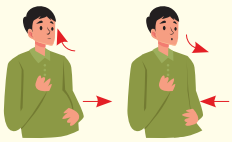


1. Scrunching your forehead... Hold... Release...
2. Squeeze your eyes tight... Hold... Release...
3. Clench your teeth hard... Hold... Release...
4. Bring your shoulders up towards your ears... Hold... Release...
5. Hold your hands out and clench your fists... Hold... Release...
6. Push your hands backwards and squeeze your shoulder blades together... Hold... Release...
7. Tighten your stomach muscles... Hold... Release...
8. Tighten your buttocks and thighs... Hold... Release...
9. Straighten your legs and pull/flex your toes towards you... Hold... Release...
10. Straighten your legs, point and curl your toes downwards... Hold... Release...

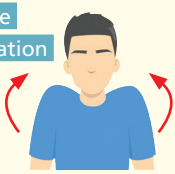
My Relaxation Strategies

You may use the chart below to plan your own relaxation exercises.

Diaphragmatic Breathing Exercises



Progressive Muscle Relaxation



Mindful Meditation



Others

Frequency of practice:

Self-soothing

Sight

Smell

Sounds

Touch

Taste

Enjoyable Hobbies and Activities

Reading



Listening to music/playing musical instruments



Watching movies



Playing video games



Sports



Gardening



Cooking/ Baking



Sewing/ art and craft



Photography



Social activities



Others

Frequency of practice:

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