

2020 Staff Wellbeing Workbook

Introduction

It can be frightening for everyone, including healthcare workers, to learn that an illness such as coronavirus (COVID-19) is spreading across the globe. The early stages of a pandemic can be especially anxiety-provoking, because we don't yet know how widespread or bad the illness is going to end up being. Feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, and uncertainty are normal during events such as a pandemic. Fortunately, being proactive about your mental health can help to keep both your mind and body stronger. People can and do experience wellbeing in all sorts of difficult circumstances. The goal of this Wellbeing Workbook is to provide you with some general information about wellbeing within the context of the emerging Coronavirus situation, and to offer strategies to stay well mentally and physically as we work through the coming weeks.

Ways to take care of yourself include:

- Reading the news from reliable sources such as the ABC, Government websites
- Take regular breaks from the 24 hour news cycle
- Recognizing the things you *can* control, like having good hand hygiene and using correct PPE
- Taking measures only if recommended by the credible sources such as Metro North Communications, Australian Government directives, advice from the World Health Organisation
- Practicing self-care (see more below)
- If necessary, seeking professional help from sources such as Benestar®, accessing Staff Support arrangements in your work place, or via a conversation with your GP

The way in which an event like COVID-19 will impact on an individual depends on many things. It can depend on the number of other stressors or life events going on around us at the time, our support network, and our own personality. It can depend on how we describe the situation to ourselves and the ways we choose to cope with it. There are many things that we can do that psychologists have found can be helpful in learning to manage stress more effectively.

This booklet contains to help you manage stress, including tips on: stress, sleep, diet and exercise, mindfulness and relaxation, and problem solving. Each topic is supplemented with strategies that will help you to cope effectively with stressors. You may find some topics to be more relevant to you. Explore and see what you would like to focus on. We have included brief exercises in the booklet that we hope will assist you to reflect on the material and to tailor the material to your own needs.

Stress Management

What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to any change that requires an adjustment or response. The body reacts to these changes with physical, mental, and emotional responses. Stress is a normal part of life. You can experience stress from your environment, your body, and your thoughts. Even positive life changes such as a promotion, a mortgage, or the birth of a child produce stress. The human body is designed to experience stress and react to it. Stress can be positive, keeping us alert, motivated, and ready to avoid danger. Stress becomes negative when a person faces continuous challenges without relief or relaxation between stressors. As a result, the person becomes overworked, and stress-related tension builds. The body's has a built-in stress response that causes physiological changes to allow the body to combat stressful situations. This stress response, also known as the "fight or flight response", is activated in case of an emergency. However, this response can become chronically activated during prolonged periods of stress. Prolonged activation of the stress response causes wear and tear on the body – both physical and emotional.

The Body's Stress Response

(Tick your stress symptoms)

| Cognitive Symptoms | Emotional Symptoms |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Memory problems • Inability to concentrate • Poor judgment • Seeing only the negative • Anxious or racing thoughts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moodiness • Irritability or short temper • Agitation, inability to relax • Feeling overwhelmed • Sense of loneliness and isolation • Depression or general unhappiness |
| Physical Symptoms | Behavioural Symptoms |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aches and pains • Diarrhoea or constipation • Nausea, dizziness • Chest pain, rapid heartbeat • Loss of sex drive • Frequent colds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating more or less • Sleeping too much or too little • Isolating yourself from others • Procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities • Using alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to relax • Nervous habits (e.g. nail biting, pacing) |

Stress can occur and build up in a number of ways. For example, stress can occur as a result of major life events (e.g. illness, changing jobs, relationship breakdown) or it can be cumulative from a range of minor everyday worries (e.g. concern about money, high workload, or relationship difficulties). Being aware of our stressors can help us cope better.

1. Write down some of the other sources of stress in your life.

While we often can't change the situations or events that occur in our life, we do have control over how we respond to these experiences. It is our response to stressful situations that will determine the impact that stress has on us.

2. How do you currently cope with stress?

Unhelpful ways of coping with stress

These coping strategies may temporarily reduce stress, but in the long run they cause more damage. Tick the ones you use.

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smoking • Drinking too much • Overeating or under-eating • Zoning out for hours in front of the TV or computer • Withdrawing from friends, family, and activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using pills or drugs to relax • Sleeping too much • Procrastinating • Filling up every minute of the day to avoid facing problems • Taking out your stress on others (lashing out, angry outbursts, physical violence) |
|---|--|

Stress Management Strategy #1: Adapt to the stressor

We often can't change the stressors in our life, but we can change how we react to them by thinking about our expectations and attitude towards the problems, and finding ways to make our thinking more helpful and productive.

- **Keep things in perspective.** Remember that the number of confirmed infections in Australia is very low. The fact that there is a great deal of news coverage on this issue does not necessarily mean that it presents any threat to you or your family.
- **Get accurate information.** It is helpful to adopt a more clinical and curious approach as you follow news reports about the virus. To that end, you will want to find a credible source you can trust. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a webpage dedicated to information on the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak ¹, and the Australian Government has a dedicated website ². Metro North also has a dedicated page ³. You may also find useful information from local or state public health agencies or even your General Practitioner.
- **Communicate with children.** Discuss the news coverage of the coronavirus with honest and age-appropriate information. Parents can also help allay distress by focusing children on routines and schedules. Remember that children will observe your behaviours and emotions for cues on how to manage their own feelings during this time.
- **Stay connected.** Maintaining social networks can foster a sense of normality and provide valuable outlets for sharing feelings and relieving stress. Feel free to share useful information you find on governmental websites with your friends and family. It will help them deal with their own anxiety. Use technology such as Skype or Facetime to keep in touch.
- **Adjust your thinking.** Your thoughts can influence your emotional and physical wellbeing. Not all thoughts are true or helpful. Negative or overly pessimistic thinking can increase stress levels and decrease motivation. Challenge yourself to think in a more balanced way, for example asking yourself what you would say to a friend who was worrying about the situation. Accept that having negative thoughts is normal, but balance them with a focus on the good and the positive in your life. Take some time to reflect on the good things in your life, including your own positive qualities.
- **Do the things that make you happy** Try to appreciate the balance in every situation. Make time to enjoy the small things in life, coffee with a friend, listening to music, being kind to yourself and others. Stay engaged with friend, use technology such as Skype or Facetime to keep in touch.
- **Seek additional help.** Individuals who feel an overwhelming nervousness, a lingering sadness, or other prolonged reactions that adversely affect their job performance or interpersonal relationships should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers can help people deal with extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals to help them find constructive ways to manage adversity.

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

2. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>

3. <https://qheps.health.qld.gov.au/hr/coronavirus>

Stress Management Strategy #2: Accept the things you can't change

Some stressors can't be avoided or changed (e.g. the death of a loved one, a serious illness, or a national recession). When stressors are unavoidable, acceptance can help us cope with the stressor in the long run. Acceptance can be difficult; however, it is easier than continuously trying to change a situation that you have no control over.

- **Don't try to control the uncontrollable.** Certain situations are beyond our control (e.g. changes to work patterns, the behaviour of other people, even the weather). Rather than stressing over these things, focus on what you can control (e.g. the way you choose to react in these situations).
- **Try to see the upside of every situation.** Learn from your mistakes and see challenges as an opportunity for personal growth.
- **Share your feelings.** Expressing your feelings, thoughts and worries can be very cathartic and therapeutic. Talk to a friend or make an appointment with a therapist.
- **Learn to forgive.** Negative feelings such as anger and resentment can keep us stuck. Learn to forgive and move on. Remember that no-one is perfect, we all make mistakes. Be kind to yourself and others.

Stress Management Strategy #3: Make time self-care and relaxation

You can reduce stress in your life by making time for enjoyable activities, self-care and relaxation. Taking care of your own needs is a necessity, not a luxury.

- **Relaxation.** Include rest and relaxation in your daily schedule. Try not to feel guilty about taking time out to relax. You will feel recharged and refreshed and this will help you to tackle the rest of the day head on. See the *Relaxation and Mindfulness* section on page xxx 17 of this booklet to discover ways to relax.
- **Do something you enjoy every day.** In the space below, write down a sample of activities that you find enjoyable or fun and then set aside time each day to participate in an activity that brings you joy. Take note of how doing this affects your mood and stress levels.

Activities I enjoy:

Stress Management Strategy #4: Adopt a healthy lifestyle

Ongoing stress can impact negatively on your health. The following simple strategies will help to improve your health and increase your resistance to stress (see the *Lifestyle, Diet and Exercise* section of this handbook on page XXXX 8 for further information):

- **Exercise regularly.** Make time for at least 30 minutes of exercise, three times per week.
- **Eat a healthy diet.** Eat healthy and well balanced meals throughout the day and drink plenty of water.
- **Reduce caffeine and sugar.** Caffeine and sugar provide temporary "highs" that end in a crash in mood and energy. Eating nutritious food and sleeping well will keep your energy levels constant throughout the day.
- **Avoid alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.** Whilst these provide temporary relief from stress, they often increase stress in the long run.
- **Get enough sleep.** Sleep plays a key role in our physical and emotional wellbeing (see the *Sleep and Stress* section on page 13 for strategies to improve your sleep).

Stress Management Strategy #5: Become organised

Time management and problem solving can make life less stressful. Use problem-solving techniques to clarify the problem and brainstorm possible solutions. Choose one solution to put into action after listing the pros and cons of each option. See the *Problem Solving During Times of Stress* section for more details.

Lifestyle, Diet and Exercise

Lifestyle

Stress produces chemical and hormonal changes in the many systems of our body. Chronic stress such as ongoing work pressure, loneliness, and long-term relationship problems, can have serious health consequences. Repeated stressful events put a long term strain on our body, contributing to medical and psychological problems down the track.

Researchers have found that three lifestyle changes can be effective in both managing and preventing stress:

1. Improving your diet
2. Increasing your physical activity, and
3. Using stress reduction techniques.

Diet

For some people, this will be the easiest place to start making healthy lifestyle changes. For others, it can be very difficult as food and eating provide us with a source of "comfort" or "reward" for having dealt with the stresses experienced during our day.

Stress can affect both eating problems and our weight. During times of stress, our body may crave "comfort" foods such as carbohydrates, which may lessen the effect on us by increasing our levels of tryptophan and amino acids. This causes an increase in the brain of the chemical messenger serotonin your brain's natural anti-depressant.

However, repeated stimulation of this brain pathway, where we keep on rewarding ourselves with tasty, high calorie food, may lead to the brain thinking we need to eat more. We then tend to overeat and gain weight, particularly around the belly.

Over time, our traditional plant-based diet of vegetables, fruits, whole grains (rich in fibre, antioxidants, minerals and phyto-chemicals), and fish, has been replaced by high-fat, high-salt, energy-dense diets. This diet plays a key role in increasing our risk for chronic diseases such as Type II diabetes, cancer, stroke, and cardiovascular disease.

Making changes

Most importantly, you need to choose your own goals and not be living out the choices of others.

In saying that though - we all need support. Humans have a fundamental need to belong in a group. Have a support person or someone who is going to travel along making lifestyle changes also, can help you stick to your goals. Plan and make decisions together, before you shop or eat out.

Accept what you cannot change. You cannot control what they sell at the café, but you can control what you choose to buy to eat. Prepare, plan and anticipate, and eat the right foods at the right time of the day.

Stress fighting foods

- **Eat breakfast.** Try oatmeal. A warm bowl of porridge with fruit to start the day, boosting levels of serotonin to calm your brain, kick starts your metabolism and helps stabilise your blood sugar level.
- **Choose wholegrain cereals, breads, and pastas.** Complex carbohydrates prompt the brain to make more serotonin; they also help you feel balanced by stabilizing blood sugar levels.
- **Cut the simple carbohydrates:** Avoid sugar sweets, soft drinks, fruit drinks.
- **Cut down on coffee, energy drinks & alcohol.** Try black or green tea. Tea is packed with antioxidants and can help relax you.
- **Increase Vitamin C intake:** Vitamin C curbs levels of stress hormones (cortisol) and helps return blood pressure to normal levels.
- **Increase magnesium:** Spinach, salmon, green leafy vegetables are all rich sources of magnesium. Low magnesium triggers headaches and fatigue, compounding the effects of stress.
- **Increase omega-3 fatty acids.** You can find omega 3 in salmon and tuna.
- **Eat a handful of nuts everyday.** Pistachios, walnuts, and almonds all help lower cholesterol and also make you feel less likely to crave sugar.
- **Increase your vegetable intake:** Stir fry green leafy vegetables, steam broccoli and zucchini, throw in a bunch of spinach into the salad, and then sprinkle with almonds.

Reduce alcohol intake and cigarettes

Aim to reduce your intake of alcohol, and if you smoke, stop. Seek help from a health professional if you need assistance. It's not easy to do it in on your own and may take a supportive hand to help you get through. At the moment, both of these may feel like an instant stress relief, but overtime, they cause greater stress and increase your likelihood of anxiety, depression and dependence.

For healthy men and women it is recommended that you do not drink more than **two standard alcoholic drinks per day**. Refer to this source for more information: <http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/your-health/alcohol-guidelines>. A standard drink is equivalent to:

- Can/Stubbie low-strength beer= 0.8 standard drink
- Can/Stubbie mid-strength beer = 1 standard drink
- Can/Stubbie full-strength beer = 1.4 standard drinks
- 100 ml wine (13.5% alcohol) = 1 standard drink
- 30 ml nip spirits=1 standard drink
- Can spirits (approx. 5% alcohol)=1.2 to 1.7 standard drinks
- Can spirits (approx 7 % alcohol)=1.6 to 2.4 standard drinks

There is no level of cigarette smoking that is considered safe. Talk to your General Practitioner about how to quit or ring Quitline (131 848) for information on the best approach for you.

Exercise

Extensive research has been conducted exploring the role of exercise in the management of stress, anxiety, and depression. Much of this research has observed that exercise is effective in the management of stress and recommended as a component for stress management.

Humans have evolved to be active

When we are stressed, depressed, or anxious, our bodies and mind will have low energy and high tension. Exercising increases our energy levels which reduces tension in our body. The body's stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, are reduced, and our body's natural painkillers and mood elevators, endorphins, are increased. There is an increase in flow of oxygen to the brain that initiates cell growth and production of new cells. It also regulates our mood, primarily because our tension is reduced. Every time we move our body our brain responds!

Exercise at any level makes your body and mind feel good. Feeling good increases your self-esteem which makes you more likely to repeat the behaviour that gave you this positive feeling. Before you know it, you'll be on a cycle of positive behaviour change!

Exercise helps you cope. In the beginning, you will probably experience more positive psychological effects than positive physical effects. The positive psychological response helps to regulate your emotions and physiological reactions to a stressful event. You relax more readily, and this can improve your mood and sense of accomplishment. Our brain is quick to respond to the changes when a new behaviour is taking place.

Remember to start slow and low in intensity, and build-up to more vigorous exercise. Check first with your GP before starting any exercise program.

Need more reasons to exercise?

1. Improves long term cardiovascular function which then improves physiological stamina.
2. Boosts your metabolism so helps you to manage your weight.
3. Reduces your risk of diabetes.
4. Improves body image, redistributing weight and changing your muscle definition.
5. Improves self-mastery, using exercise as a resource for preventative coping. You may learn to see previous demands as less threatening or harmful if you have the confidence to know that exercise will help you reduce tension and enhance mood.
6. Improves your memory and concentration.
7. Improves your sleep.
8. You may just feel great about you, others, and the world around you.

How much exercise?

As little as 10 minutes of moderate exercise, (so that your heart rate increases but you can still talk), can trigger short term mood improvements. That's a walk around the hospital at lunchtime!

For long term gains, aim for 3 to 5 x 30 minute sessions/week. The more you do, the greater the benefits. Aim to be active everyday. If you take the stairs, avoid the lift. Park a little further away. Stand instead of sitting. Think of movement as an opportunity to feel better about yourself, rather than an inconvenience.

Sleep and Stress

Why is sleep important?

| Sleep is important for: | Problems with sleep can lead to: |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical health • Psychological well-being & mood • Positive relationships • Replenishing energy • Repairing injuries or illness • Growth • Attention & concentration • Memory • Performance at work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Daytime tiredness • Trouble staying alert • Poor attention, concentration & memory • Problems with judgement & reaction time • Poor physical coordination • Mood disturbance • Easily irritable • Worry about not sleeping • Relationship conflict • Poor work performance |

It's important to remember that just because you have a poor night's sleep does not mean you will experience all of these problems. The amount of sleep people need each day varies a lot, anywhere from 4-10 hours, so the seriousness of problems will depend on the demands of the day and the extent of the sleep deprivation.

Could stress be affecting your sleep?

Do you have any of the following problems?

- Trouble falling asleep?
- Waking up on and off during the night?
- Waking up too early, and then finding it hard to get back to sleep?

If so, then it's important you understand how you can free yourself from the vicious circle of insomnia.

The Vicious Cycle of Insomnia

Adapted from "Insomnia and your thinking" (www.cci.health.wa.gov.au)

This figure shows that negative thoughts about not sleeping well can keep our sleep problems going even after the initial stressor has passed. Like a self-fulfilling prophecy, these patterns of thinking can increase our anxiety and worry in the day and at night, making our bodies and minds tense which can make getting back to a regular sleep routine even harder.

Sleep Management Strategy #1: Manage your anxiety and worry

Use strategies to help reduce arousal levels in your nervous system. The following help to soothe and calm your mind and body.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • Breathing exercises | • Mindfulness meditation & exercises |
| • Guided imagery | • Yoga |
| • Progressive muscle relaxation | • Tai Chi |

The CD included in this kit has tracks to help you. The relaxation exercises can be used to calm your body and help you get to sleep. In particular, *Mountain Meditation*, *Progressive Muscle Relaxation* and *Letting Go* are recommended for this purpose.

While you may experience relaxation using the mindfulness exercises, they are not aimed at helping you relax. Instead these practices help you to not get so caught up in your worries by bringing you back to the present moment, so are ideal to help you manage worries and unhelpful thoughts you might have during the day about sleeping.

Sleep Management Strategy #2: Challenge negative thoughts about sleep

Do you get caught up in any of these unhelpful thoughts?

| Negative thought trap | Unhelpful thoughts | Helpful thoughts |
|---|---|---|
| Having unrealistic expectations about how much sleep you need. Being rigid increases performance anxiety, which makes falling asleep even harder. Even good sleepers can take up to 30 minutes to fall asleep and wake once or twice during the night. | <i>"I will not be able to cope if I don't get 8 hours sleep a night."</i> | <i>"I like to have 8 hours sleep, but if I get less I will be able to manage."</i> |
| Believing the worst about the meaning of sleep problems. Unhelpful beliefs here can lead to increased levels of distress which can cause further stress and tension making it even harder to sleep. | <i>"I haven't slept well for 3 nights. I am not going to be able to fix this!"</i> | <i>"I might be stressed; maybe I should work out what's going on and do something about it."</i> |
| Assuming everything that goes wrong is due to of poor sleep. Yes, poor sleep can affect your mood and ability to think clearly and pay attention at work, but it is not the only cause for things that go wrong in the day. | <i>"If I don't sleep well, I will surely feel terrible tomorrow & perform badly at work."</i> | <i>"Lots of different things can affect how I feel and perform at work. Sleep is just one part of the picture."</i> |

What are some of the unhelpful thoughts you have about sleep? See if you can come up with more helpful ways of thinking.

Unhelpful Thoughts

Helpful Thoughts

Sleep Management Strategy #3: Improve your sleep habits

Often when we have trouble sleeping our behaviours change in ways that we think will help us sleep but they actually make matters worse. Here are some guidelines that research shows helps most people get back into a regular sleep routine after a period of disturbed sleep.

- **Regular rhythm.** Train your brain to know when to sleep by keeping your sleep/wake pattern regular. Go to bed and get up at about the same time every day of the week, including weekends.
- **Sleep when sleepy.** Tune in to your body and go to bed when you feel the wave of drowsiness come. Don't go to bed if you aren't feeling sleepy or lie in bed wide awake for too long.
- **The 20-minute rule.** If you haven't been able to get to sleep within 20 minutes of going to bed, get up and do something boring or relaxing. Try not to expose yourself to light, raise your body temperature or expose yourself to anything exciting or interesting.
- **Avoid stimulants.** Caffeine and nicotine are a bad idea within at least 4-6 hours of going to bed. This includes coffee, tea, cola or energy drinks, chocolate, some medications and cigarettes.
- **Avoid alcohol.** Alcohol interrupts the stages of sleep you normally cycle through impacting your sleep quality. If you do drink alcohol, try not to have any within 4-6 hours of going to bed.
- **No naps.** Napping during the day can make it harder to get to sleep at night as you may not be as tired. If you must nap, make sure it is for no longer than 20-30 minutes and not after 3pm.

Relaxation and Mindfulness

Relaxation

Relaxation is a state of calmness and peace in which you are free of stress, tension, anxiety, worry or anger. It is a time where you stop thinking about work and worrying about tomorrow. Instead, you allow your brain to switch off and your body to rest and recharge. It is important to make time for relaxation everyday as relaxation can help to decrease muscle tension, lower blood pressure, slow down heart and breathing rates and improve your sleep. Taking regular time out to relax can also increase your body's ability to cope with stress.

There are several different ways that people like to relax, and it's important that you find a way that works for you.

Formal relaxation practices:

Meditation

Deep breathing

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Everyday activities that can be relaxing:

Going for a walk

Fishing

Gardening

Active forms of relaxation:

Yoga

Tai Chi

Painting

Reading

Baking

Some of the tracks on the CD included in this kit can help you to attain a relaxed and calm state of being. Try the following tracks to help you relax: *Progressive Muscle Relaxation* and *Breathing Meditation*. The remaining tracks on this CD aim to increase mindfulness. The following section provides a description of what mindfulness is and how mindfulness can benefit you.

What is mindfulness?

Have you ever noticed your mind wandering or found yourself worrying about an upcoming event? We often get so caught up in our thoughts that we lose sight of what we are doing. We start operating on 'autopilot' rather than focusing on the 'here and now'.

Being mindful is the opposite to operating on 'autopilot'. When we are mindful, we notice the things that are happening around us, we focus our attention on what we are doing, and we experience things completely.

- A person is 'mindful' when:
 - They are attentive and concentrating on what's happening around them
 - They are able to observe their thoughts and feelings, and
 - They are accepting of what they think and feel.

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that helps you train yourself to be more **present in the moment** and let go of negative or unhelpful thinking patterns.

What are the benefits of mindfulness?

Mindfulness is widely used within psychological therapy. It has been shown to reduce stress, negative ruminations, anxiety and worry. It can provide individuals with a powerful tool to gain perspective, take a break from stressful thoughts, and experience greater self-awareness, acceptance and compassion.

- Learning to be Mindful can help you:
 - Cope with stress
 - Clear your head
 - Slow racing thoughts
 - Relax

The core features of mindfulness

Observing

The first core feature of mindfulness involves observing your experience with a kind and gentle curiosity. Mindfulness aims to shift one's focus of attention away from thinking to simply observing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (e.g., touch, sight, sound, smell, taste).

Describing

This feature of mindfulness relates to noticing in detail what you are observing. When observing an orange, describe its shape, colour, and texture e.g. "smooth", or "round". The same process also can be applied when describing emotions (e.g. "heavy", "tense")

Participating Fully

Participating fully means allowing your self to become immersed in the experience, without excluding anything. Try to notice all aspects of whatever task or activity you are doing, and do it with your full care and attention.

Being Non-Judgemental

It is important to accept your experience as it is, without trying to change it. Trying to avoid or control experiences often leads to prolonged emotional distress. When being mindful, we do not evaluate experiences or describe them as good, bad, right, or wrong. We also do not try to immediately control or avoid experiences. One of the key features of mindfulness is accepting all of one's experience as it is whilst bringing a kind and gentle curiosity to one's experience. This is one of the most challenging aspects of mindfulness, and takes time and practice to develop.

Focusing on One Thing at a Time

Mindfulness requires you to focus your attention on one thing at a time. This can be difficult as our minds naturally jump from one thought to another. Often, while we are observing, distracting thoughts emerge that we tend to 'chase'. The key to mindfulness is to develop the skill of noticing when your thoughts have drifted from observing mode to thinking mode, and then gently returning to observing your experience.

How to become mindful

Mindfulness is a state of 'being' that is not easily achieved. It requires plenty of practice, patience and effort. Even 5 minutes of practice a day can make a difference so start to set aside some time each day to practice being mindful. Beginners may find it easier to listen to a guided mindfulness CD when starting out. Mindfulness CDs will take you through meditation exercises that explain how you can become more mindful (see the *TPCH Mindfulness CD* that we've included in this kit).

Mindfulness requires you to concentrate and focus for an extended period of time. Some people find it difficult to focus for long without their thoughts wandering and this can be frustrating. Whilst practicing mindfulness, it helps if you:

- **Accept** that thoughts will come and go and that your mind will wander at times
- **Gently** move your attention back to whatever you were focusing on when you notice that your mind has wandered
- **Persevere.** The more you practice the better you become
- **Choose** meditations that are easy for you and start with these

Safety Tips

Mindfulness meditation is a safe practice for most people. At times it can exacerbate symptoms in people who are suffering from acute psychiatric problems. It may be helpful, however, for people whose symptoms are in remission. If you have experienced psychosis (an altered sense of reality) in the past, please talk to your psychiatrist or clinical psychologist before trying mindfulness.

People who use mindfulness in formal (guided practice) or informal (applied to everyday situations) practice tend to cope better with chronic pain and negative emotions as they arise. If you find, however, that your pain or emotions worsen over time, please see your general practitioner for advice.

Getting started!

Mindfulness meditation can be carried out whilst sitting in a chair, lying on the floor or in bed, or standing up. Choose a position that is comfortable for you. Whilst starting out, it can be helpful to practice mindfulness in an environment that is not full of distractions. It can help to choose a calm and quiet place to practice mindfulness. Put on your *TPCH Guided Mindfulness and Relaxation CD*, close your eyes, and start practicing being mindful. Try to remember that your thoughts will wander from time to time, but that this is normal. When you notice this happening, gently bring your attention back to the present. Enjoy the journey!

TPCH Guided Mindfulness and Relaxation CD**

The guided mindfulness and relaxation CD included in this kit offers the following meditation exercises:

1. Introduction

Relaxation for the Mind

2. Empty bowl meditation (6:20)

3. Breathing meditation (7:55)

4. Mountain meditation (7:00)

Relaxation for the Body

5. Body scan (14:00)

6. Progressive muscle relaxation (9:15)

7. Letting go (9:50)

Relaxation for Groups

8. Relaxation and Mindfulness for stress reduction (9:30)

Relaxation for Personal Practice

9. Silence with bells (3:12)

10. Silence with bells (10:13)

**Please note that this CD is designed to play on a computer not a CD player. The files can also be transferred to an mp3 player.

Credits: livingwell.org.au (2,3); Jon Kabat-Zinn (5, 6); innerhealthstudio.com (6), meditationoasis.com (7). Kay Rawsley (1), Julie Green & Lisa Kunde (8).

All tracks are free to use for non-profit purposes.

NOT FOR RE-SALE.

Problem Solving During Times of Stress

Effective problem-solving skills are useful in managing stressors and reducing anxiety. However, these skills are even more useful during times of increased stress. At these times we often face cumulative stressors; sometimes the nature and extent of these stressors is such that it may feel that things are becoming “out of our control”.

The capacity to think clearly is sometimes compromised when under severe stress. So it may be best – if possible - to postpone making any significant, life changing decisions during these times and until things settle down. In terms of day to day difficulties however, it is often helpful to focus on re-establishing some sense of control - a structured problem-solving approach might be helpful. One such approach involves a series of discrete steps, including:

Steps to structured problem-solving

- Accurately defining the problem
- Brainstorming possible solutions
- Evaluating the solutions
- Identifying contingencies associated with the preferred solution
- Developing an implementation plan
- Building on this to develop a step-by-step action plan, and
- Monitoring and adjusting the plan, as needed.

If the problem is complex, it is helpful to scope out the problem and include an assessment of the circumstances that are surrounding it.

Some people find it helpful to use a tool such as a 'mind map' where the various aspects of the problem are set out visually. Then, try to brainstorm as many solutions as possible. Don't attempt to evaluate them at this stage – just try to identify as many different ways of addressing the problem as you can.

After generating a broad range of ideas, it is time to evaluate the pros and cons. When you are doing this, it is worth considering both the short and longer term consequences of each potential solution. A solution which might solve a problem easily in the short term but likely lead to longer term problems is unlikely to be optimal (unless, of course, it is the best of a narrow range of imperfect solutions!)

Try also to be aware of whether you are evaluating ideas from a 'feelings' or 'logic' based perspective. Ideally, try to evaluate each idea from each perspective in turn; unrecognised or unacknowledged feelings may drive us toward a solution which may or may not be optimal, and by recognising this we minimise the potential that such an unconscious process will predominate our decision making approach.

- It may be helpful to imagine that the problem is one being faced by a close friend or colleague. What factors would you suggest he or she consider in making the decision? Think about how these factors – or similar factors – may relate to your own situation. Make a note of these for further work.
- There may be benefit in seeking input from others who have had experience in similar situations. In this way, you may gain insight into possible options to explore or – alternatively – pitfalls to avoid.

When the issue is significant it might be worth – as far as possible – reflecting on your chosen solution for a day or two prior to implementing it.

Remember – in the case of many problems, there is no 'ideal' solution; indeed, some solutions are simply the best of the options available at the time given the resources, opportunities and other contingencies available.

Having thoroughly considered the problem and given careful thought to the solution provides some peace of mind.

Below is an example of a structured process that may be of assistance in working through a problem. Whilst we might intuitively follow such a process when not under stress, we may find it more difficult to do so when stress levels are heightened.

Problem Solving Steps

Step 1. Define the problem

What is the nature of the problem?

- Try to write it in specific terms, for example "Do I allow my son to attend 'Schoolies' next year?"

Why is it a problem?

- Identify your specific concerns here, for example "I'm worried that he will be exposed to drugs; he might be encouraged to engage in dangerous activities; he is 17 years old and needs increased autonomy; if I don't allow him to go, he may feel I don't trust him and this may impact on our relationship; each time he raises the issue, it ends with an argument" etc.

When does the problem occur?

- For example, "Arguments about this arise each time the issue is raised; these are likely to become more frequent next year as the time approaches".

Who is involved when the problem occurs?

- For example, “The arguments are more likely when he is interacting with me rather than with his dad”.

Summarise the above information in a sentence:

- For example, when my son raises the issue of Schoolies; I am very worried because he may be exposed to a range of situations that could be problematic. So far, I have refused to agree to this, and so we end up arguing.

Step 2. Brainstorm possible solutions.

Take a sheet of paper and write down all possible solutions that come to mind. Think laterally, and generate as many as you can, regardless of whether they seem implausible. Don't try to evaluate them at this stage, simply record them for later review.

Possible solutions:

- For example: Maintain refusal; refuse but offer alternative; offer attractive alternative and let your teenager choose. Agree, but with conditions – e.g., who he stays with, having mobile phone on, calling regularly to check in, etc.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

Step 3. Identify the potential costs and benefits of each solution.

Record the costs and benefits of each solution below. When you have done this choose the solution that appears best on the basis of the evidence available.

| | Costs | Benefits |
|---|-------|----------|
| 1 | | |
| 2 | | |
| 3 | | |
| 4 | | |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 5 | | |
| 6 | | |

Solution selected:

Step 4. Identify any contingencies that may need to be implemented so that the solution can be put into place.

For example, if deciding to agree with conditions: Will need to choose an appropriate time for the discussion; will need to establish a positive context by outlining intention to compromise with Ben to find a solution that – whilst it might not be optimal for either - is workable for you both.

Step 5. Develop an implementation plan.

A plan which is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant to solving the problem, and Time-specific) is more likely to be helpful to you.

Step 6. Write your action plan, detailing the specific steps you need to take to achieve your outcome.

Step 7. Monitor and review the implementation.

What is working?

For example: We reached agreement and there have been no major issues arising since then.

What can be improved and adjusted?

For example: My son is unhappy with one of the ground rules, so this needs further discussion.

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