

14. Being calm in a high-stress situation

The following tips will help you be calm before, during and after a high-stress situation.

The most effective way to overcome the stress and anxiety of a high-stress situation is usually to be realistic about how much of the situation you can change. You may not be able to control the situation but you can control the effect it has on you.

In these hectic times, the ability to become calm is one of the most important life skills. It enables you to restore your sense of wellbeing when things go wrong. It helps you to feel better when normally you would feel awful. It helps you address with equanimity the stressful things that happen.

Breathing to become calm

The usefulness of any technique to become calm depends on whether you believe it will be useful. If you have successfully practised the technique in the past, it is more likely to work in the future. Therefore, the best time to practise calming techniques is not in a crisis, just like the best time to practise swimming is not when the boat is sinking. The best time to practise calming techniques is when life is relatively calm.

Breathing techniques have proved effective in bringing about calm. Deep and focused breathing causes your body to release endorphins, which are tranquillising hormones.

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life. The following simple breathing exercise is a good place to start.

- Find a warm, quiet place and a straight-backed chair. Loosen your clothes, take off your shoes and sit down.
- When you do the following breathing exercises, try to focus on the experience of breathing and not on what is happening around you or on yesterday's, today's or tomorrow's problems.
- Take a deep breath in through your nostrils. Do this without exertion, neither raising your shoulders nor puffing out your chest.
- Hold the breath for a second or two. Imagine the breath flowing through your body into the extremities — your hands, feet and skull.
- Slowly breathe out through your lips.
- As you breathe out, feel the tension melting from your body into the floor. As you continue to practise, you may notice that the tension is passing from your body through the soles of your feet.
- Repeat the exercise.
- Try to do this exercise for at least 10 breaths without losing concentration too much.
- Try to do the exercise every day or second day.
- If you find the exercise helpful, make it part of your routine (at the same place and same time) and slowly extend the time. Even five minutes, four days a week, should result in a very pleasurable sense of calm that gradually extends well beyond the time of your practice.

Other calming exercises

By practising these calming exercises regularly, you can equip yourself to better handle the stresses of daily life.

- Sigh (with a big out breath), drop your shoulders, close your eyes and form your lips into a half smile.
- Physically change your position by sitting down, opening a window, getting up from your desk or getting a cup of tea. Simple changes in position can dramatically alter the amount of tension you feel.
- Meditation, yoga and massage are proven calming strategies.

- The fitter you are, the better able you are to cope. Many fitness activities (such as bicycling, walking, jogging or swimming) involve repetitious movements. Approached in a relaxed frame of mind, such repetitious movement also has a powerful meditative effect.

Calm during a crisis

- Do the breathing exercise that you have practised.
- Slow down your actions.
- Remove yourself and others from the situation if necessary.
- Apply the school's crisis plan.

Calm after a crisis

- Remove your shoes, make yourself comfortable and stay warm.
- Don't use cigarettes, coffee or alcohol.
- Continue your breathing exercise. Listen to each breath and concentrate on your breathing, just as you have practised.
- Seek support.

Support

One of the biggest mistakes people make when trying to deal with a crisis is to try to handle it alone. Seeking support is not a sign of weakness. Seek it from a friend, a personal counsellor or a colleague.

There are enormous — sometimes even lifesaving — benefits to be had from an intimate discussion with another person. Whether that discussion yields useful advice or not is seldom the issue. The real benefit comes from sharing your experience and in receiving encouragement to continue.