

This is a set of tools for intervening with or helping to clear your mind when things get overwhelming as an initial coping tool with stress and even to engage some “triggers”. Don’t worry* (*so don’t fixate on “mindfulness”) too much if you don’t always feel calm/collected etc. they’re more for creating space to process mentally and physically and potentially reset your pace to help you catch your groove again rather than a panacea for instant chill (though some can get close to helping with that too). Below: tools and exercises I’ve personally used and find useful for navigating stress (including Post-Traumatic Stress) listed in order of simplicity/quickness.

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Hands on the heart+breathe; Butterfly Hug [grounding; intervene with unwanted/intrusive thoughts]

Intrusive thoughts are really challenging and often upsetting.

There are a few techniques for disrupting them I learned for healing from PTSD (especially when unwanted "intrusive thoughts" are going on and you're stuck in a loop). One of the fastest is called a "butterfly hug":

Basically cross your arms with your palms to your shoulders (like how someone would do the [Wakandan salute](#) in the Black Panther movie/comics) and repeatedly tap your shoulders/sides.

Pick a simple song (like a nursery tune or something)/poem or something positive to repeat/focus on and keep doing so for a few minutes so it replaces the pattern of the attacking

thoughts.

You can potentially intensify it by having your eyes look back and forth between two items (say a clock and a book on your nightstand, or maybe one foot and the other)--this is part of what EMDR therapy relies on.

The alternate tapping + back and forth eye movement basically makes both sides of your brain work together a bit more together than they did before, while also interrupting the negative thoughts with something else that occupies your attention too.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGGJrqscvtU>

<https://www.emdrresearchfoundation.org/.../butterfly-hug.pdf>

Listen to ambient rain, waves, wind, etc. [Grounding]

Audio that can very quickly change the mood and release some stress with sound:

<https://asoftmurmur.com/>

(also has an app)

[Grounding] Box breathing technique:

Inhale 4 counts, hold breath 4 counts, exhale 4 counts, hold empty breath 4 counts. Includes visual guide:

<https://quietkit.com/box-breathing/>

1. [Grounding from dissociation] Quick 54321 step grounding exercise

The 5-4-3-2-1 Coping Technique

Ease your state of mind in stressful moments.

Acknowledge **5** things that you can see around you.



Acknowledge **4** things that you can touch around you.



Acknowledge **3** things that you can hear around you.

Acknowledge **1** thing that you can taste around you.



Acknowledge **2** things that you can smell around you.



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Fastest/easiest to get into mindfulness exercise I know--sometimes even easier to start than the deep breathing practice listed above.

It's great for catching yourself when you're at the verge of dissociation / depersonalization / derealization (typically effective for folks who identify with anxiety and especially PTSD/Complex PTSD related patterns)

0) Take a deep breath.

5) see-Identify 5 things in your environment that are the same color (I.e., can you notice 5 things that are orange? Purple?)

4) hear-find 4 different sounds in your environment

3) touch-find 4 Different things you can touch or notice yourself feeling

2) smell-identify or discern two different smells

1) notice what you can taste

The numbers and senses can be mixed and matched. In general the more tangible the feel the more grounding it tends to be for myself.

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How to deal with rage:

<https://www.wikihow.com/Deal-with-Rage>

Learning from anger/rage:

<https://lighttelecommunication.blogspot.com/2015/07/anger-and-action.html>

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2. Breathing basics

[especially important for establishing healing/cortisol-reducing cardiovascular patterns; sometimes challenging to do so I go to the 54321 exercise first as it's easier to focus attention

on what I see/feel/smell before calming my breathing]

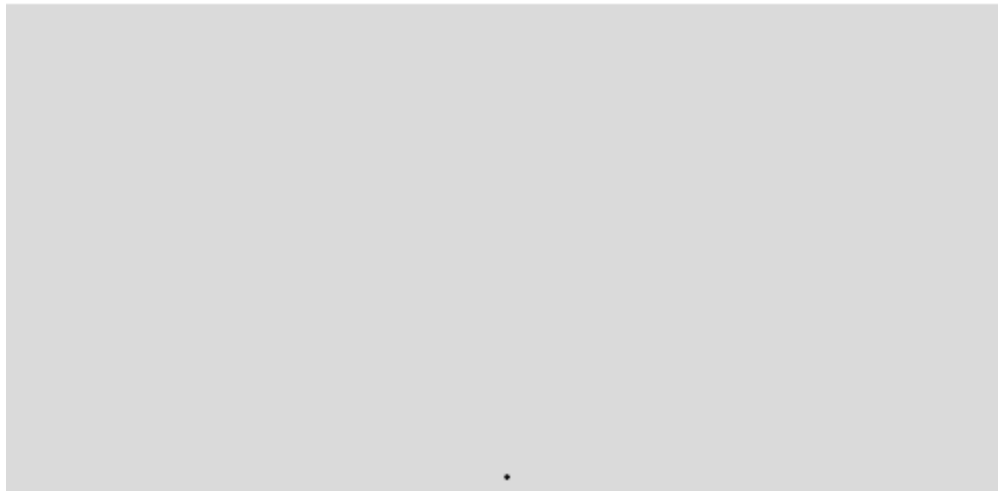
1. Inhale using your belly to your tailbone, count deliberately up to 8
 2. Hold, count to 6 at same pace
 3. Exhale, counting to to 10
- Repeat.

Try to do this at least twice or until you naturally tend to breathe with a longer exhale

Synch your breathing with this visual guide:

https://www.reddit.com/r/Damnthatsinteresting/comments/662wgb/anxiety_stress_sync_your_breathing_with_this/

Sync your breathing with this



Audio guide:

There are actual guided breathing exercises and meditations on youtube somewhere that are worth searching for but I haven't used any to vouch for yet.

The idea is to pace your own breathing with the sounds around you, and the easiest for me is often with simple movement like an exhale and inhale in line with my steps, or counting/feeling heart beats.

In live performances, I use this opening sound in this video with audiences and for myself to

breathe in sync with the opening notes. You can follow along if an audio guide helps. As soon as you press play it starts on an exhale.

<https://youtube.com/watch?v=o-KYmZ4iJ04>

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3. Color+ breathing exercise [anxiety]

Intentional deep breathing/mindfulness exercise--good for prepping into Zazen meditation

0. Sit comfortably, observe/notice (if eyes closed) where tension exists in your body;

0.5. Release tension in your body as you find it--especially during exhales

1. Inhale deeply to the tailbone and think of a color you associate with positive things (i.e. sky blue with calm/peace/clarity)

2. Exhale for longer than it took to inhale and think of a color you associate with negative things (i.e. red or gray for anxiety, fog, etc.)

3. Do it 3 times, then 3 more--this time listening to one sound around you and adding a sound to focus on each time

4. Do a final set and add an affirmation with each exhale

For those who wonder "what's an affirmation? What am I going to affirm? Or How do you make an affirmation?"

Here is what I found useful as pathways for identifying an affirmation:

1. Using the positive focus during the exhale with gratitude as a personal affirmation

You can use the positive thing you focused on as you exhale and associate it with something you can appreciate about yourself in a statement. e.g. "I have peace, I create peace. I am peace."

2. Demystifying "detachment" and Positive Self-Talk:

These can be general statements--in some psychology/trauma healing (especially from intrusive thoughts) and OCD recovery circles, "positive self-talk" is often used to acknowledge the difficulty of a situation while removing one's attachment to the intrusive situation so that your actions don't have to be dictated by the thoughts that run through you.

Saying something like "This is challenging, I'll get through this", or "I have endured. I/we will succeed."

3. This is where cultural affirmations become very helpful as well, including looking to the origins and meanings of your name +any family affiliations (clans etc.), symbols (crests), and/or values.

Chi miigwetch to Abigail Eiler, Makwa doodem Ojibwe counselor for teaching this.

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4. Chanting/Reading aloud to regulate [racing] thoughts and breath

I've found * (and this is a pretty personal choice) that reading aloud, or chanting for a period of time (i.e. the duration of time it takes for an incense stick to burn down) can help with resetting the rhythms in the mind and putting stuff into better relationship for your finally just chill and/or meditate or maybe sleep.

Chants/Repeating Affirmations

Chant/repeated affirmation can help give a rhythm/frame or way to "box"/regulate thoughts that your attention needs to acclimate to and keep going until you're in a position to sort of recognize the differences between where you are/what you're doing now vs. what you're feeling/thinking/experiencing from the past etc.

I use the Nichiren Buddhist Lotus Sutra's title to chant in Japanese (repeating "nam myoho renge kyo" 3 times in one exhaled breath, and said once during the in-breath).



You don't have to do it as I do or even follow any Buddhist practice (I chose it as many of the practices are available to share with others and not necessarily religious, though the core teaching about the lotus sutra is about releasing suffering), but for me the fact that it was a foreign language helped challenge me to remember and focus on other feelings as I tried to recite, or I would use each repetition of the chant as an opportunity for acknowledging one thought, or giving gratitude to one individual who comes to mind before releasing the thought and moving on to being open to whatever else comes up or being "empty" of thoughts.

For me I would use a burning incense stick as a timer which would take about 15-20 minutes to burn down.

But sometimes if you're willing to push yourself or disrupt a thought, a simple song like a nursery rhyme, or in my case I sometimes will use a few verses of the Sesame Street Song (it's melodically interesting and complex enough to really challenge me just enough to redirect my focus) can work as well.

5. Zazen (still meditation)*

*if you feel stable enough to settle and sit still, a sitting meditation like zazen may be helpful

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LL2XUteoUsM>

Sit comfortably (typically but not necessarily in lotus position) with good posture with the crown of your head tilting up and breathe in with your belly to your tailbone.

Focus on releasing tension in body

You may observe but choose not to engage any thoughts that may emerge; let them pass, do not focus on them, be still, become clear.

Sometimes setting a gentle timer for 2 minutes to start and adding a minute helps me when first starting out in an anxious state. 5 minutes is also feasible, or psychologically set a time for a number just shy of it like 4 or 8 minutes so it doesn't feel like as much of a time commitment, (compared to a rounded number like 10 or 15) at first and afterward, you can choose to continue beyond the initial timeframe.

A metaphor for considering meditation: rinsing a scrape

In metaphor, imagine a time where I was doing a lot and accidentally tripped and scraped myself. I take a moment to look and rinse off the scrape with a little bit of water that was on hand or just brush off some dust.

It's a moment where I check to make sure nothing is too severely hurt, and even if I do find something that needs more attention, I may realize it doesn't all need to dictate my immediate actions. It can be given further care and attention later when I get to a better place--like getting soap and water, disinfectant and a bandaid etc. doesn't have to be done all at once.

Meditation essentially prioritizes a moment for you to observe what may be beckoning for your attention while putting yourself in a position to choose, *without letting those thoughts dictate your actions.*

It's ok to notice anger or conflicting thoughts/feelings.

While meditation can help with facilitating clarity, it's a Western misconception that you'll suddenly arrive at a lofty sense of "peace/tranquility/etc.", it gives you an opportunity to see the things that come up in your thoughts (including unpleasant/intrusive ones) without having to follow through with them. It gives some clarity but doesn't "solve" the work that needs to be done. It can however, put you in a better place to recognize some priorities and work towards eventually piecing together the kind of future you'd like to focus on making. Even some tibetan monks I listened to don't put too much stock in meditation beyond that. And for me it doesn't have to be an all the time/every day thing though it does help to sort myself out when I get there.

The point is that you've prioritized a place for it all to be valid enough to be seen but not necessarily something you have to follow or commit to.

It doesn't have to equal an instant nirvana/or a sense of being in a state of absolute "enlightenment" or transcendence. Those are often fallacious myths that come with the Western Colonial thought process. Recall "enlightenment" is a verb, not a noun. But in many cultures, including in Buddhist teachings, at the core of all sentient beings there is something good which is what makes us worthy to be here and realizing that is what meditation can help make easier to connect with our own selves.

Movement meditations: in place

Qigong for alleviating anxiety and healing

The Bone Marrow Cleanse sequence is a fairly feasible beginner's entry point into qigong, the 20 minutes goes by quickly as you start to do it and there are shorter 15 minute versions without spoken guidance as well.

Focus on pacing breath with the movements. Don't worry if you're not quite getting all of it correct, just do them--if you're doing what you can you can always do it better next time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=JPYUz5npvvo>

Mitigate bed-time emotional/physical flashbacks with Qigong at night before bed (~15 mins)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZfRxXaPM1Y>

One of my challenges is getting physical/emotional flashbacks *right as I'm about to try to sleep*. It can be really frustrating and was often overwhelming to manage the day, only to have

to get back up and try using whatever techniques I had access to again.

For those working through trauma, know that as you relax more, a lot of suppressed stuff or intrusive thoughts can pop up when you first start to really wind down/relax (which is why it's absolutely valid for some folks to have unpleasant early experiences with meditation; and why I couldn't figure out why trying to sleep would bring up sort of emotional flashbacks that don't really have a specific origin).

It's not an easy fix, but it gave some peace of mind to know that giving an extra 20-30 minutes before sleeping to do this exercise can potentially give me room to wind down some, let the unpleasant things pop up, still have capacity to manage/de-escalate them and then go to sleep rather than having to fight resurfacing feelings as soon as one tries to sleep.

Engaging the Subconscious, Preparing for Best Outcomes*

This is tricky, challenging, and ideally done with guidance, it's an art not really a science but science certainly informs how we can navigate.

One way to understand (which is still different from doing/living/healing!) is a scene from Return of the Jedi where Luke has to go into a cave as part of his training and confront a scary vision: Even if it's entirely fictitious and rather removed from actual scriptures etc., a lot of the scenes with him in Return of the Jedi do mirror some of the phenomenon many zen buddhists confront. Not needing a light saber in the cave to confront a horrible vision *could* be interpreted a bit like an extended metaphor for observing or bearing witness to intrusive thoughts while meditating. You don't actually have to do anything with or about the "vision" in front of you, and there's a part of oneself to *potentially* overcome or accept. And acceptance could have happened from the beginning. But the practice basically just has one prioritize time to bear witness with their presence.

It gives you an opportunity to see what might need further work or what you can let go of (once/if you can make sense of any of it on your own/with help).

So say you have recurring nightmares, you experienced something that your brain was trying to protect you from in the past/future. In a waking moment you can now re-write/sketch etc. what *you do want*/a good ending and review it often (several times a day, and especially before sleeping).

The neurobiology of trauma and sexual assault:

https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=dwTQ_U3p5Wc

For those who can listen to the full 2 hrs, it's a lecture for first responders for understanding common traumatic behavioral responses and dispelling commonly perpetuated myths like "fight or flight" when in reality there's "freeze, fawn (submit/appease), flight, fight" .

Further personal guides and resources:

[Note some of these are hot mess open drafts but if you need the info for things that you can build long-term like conflict transformation tools, and some research etc. there's something below for you to work with]

One of the best guides for “PTSD”/“CPTSD” related stress and coping/adjustment found so far:
[Content warning, it's a guide for survivors of sexual violence/assault -- useful regardless of how long ago one might have experienced a disturbing/traumatic event]

This can be a useful diy guide for mapping common traumatic patterns to sexual assault/rape and how to start healing or navigate initial steps out of them regardless of where you live, supporters/caregivers and the survivor would all benefit from going through parts of it *as feasible*, I treated it more like a menu and picked out what was relevant for me:

<https://www.thehavens.org.uk/media/Self-Help-Guide-for-Survivors-of-Sexual-Assault-v.2-March-2019.pdf>

Resources for helping make relationships more resilient (potentially some dated links from 2015 specific to my own healing path but several resources are still useful).

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1HZ2miFsihSyl3n2S1sWo7gBAuqGdum-nJfF073VljDo/edit?usp=drivesdk>

Recommendations and resources for the American Indian Health Family Services Sacred Bundle Project's Minobimaadiz Bagosenmang (wellness and hope) Suicide Prevention Screening program. See resources linked at the bottom of the note:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BPvwuQFH2wOElm1UauFGZJ_1EvC8U9ISPsb13njF0/edit?usp=drivesdk

References

When “Mindfulness” becomes misleading, and other teachings from the Lotus Sutra in Buddhism:

<https://youtu.be/9qqGE8ZulAg?t=1613>

Intentional Breathing

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5455070/>

<https://www.npr.org/2010/12/06/131734718/just-breathe-body-has-a-built-in-stress-reliever>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/relaxation-techniques-breath-control-helps-quell-errant-stress-response>

<https://www.mindful.org/fight-stress-intentional-breathing/>