



# (5) Calming Our Minds

When a stressful event happens, what are your first thoughts? The way you think about a stressful event can make you feel even more stressed. Are you a person who thinks that whatever happens, it's someone else's fault? Do you say to yourself that it's something that you can't do anything about? Or do you look at the stressful event as a challenge? Do you say it's an opportunity to learn something about yourself? Do you think the event could make you stronger?

We can change how we think about stressful things. Our thinking can help us—or do us in. Our minds control our emotions. If we think sad thoughts, we feel unhappy. If we think anxious thoughts, we become tense. When we think that we are going to be lonely and unhappy, chances are we will. This chapter will help us relax our minds and change how we think.

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## Two-Minute Stress-Busters

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Write in a journal.

Light a candle.

Ask for what you need.

Say something nice to someone.

Laugh out loud.

Tell a joke.

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## Visualization

### ❖ food for thought

*Try this!*

Every day when you wake up,  
say to yourself 20 times  
"Every day, in every way,  
I am getting better and better."

—Emile Coue

We can feel less stressed by using our imaginations. It's called the **power of positive thinking**. Even when we are not relaxed, we can imagine relaxation spreading through our bodies. We can imagine ourselves in a safe and beautiful place. This place can be one we know, or one we make up. If we imagine we are relaxed, we will feel relaxed.

### *Creating your special place*

Create your own special place in your imagination.<sup>13</sup> Dream of a place where you can go anytime to relax. This place may be indoors or out.

Have someone slowly read the passage below.  
Or, read it first to yourself.

To go to your special place, lie down so that you are comfortable. Close your eyes or if you prefer, look softly down toward your heart.... Imagine yourself walking slowly to a quiet place in your mind.... Your place can be indoors or outside.... It needs to be peaceful and safe.... Picture yourself leaving your worries behind.... Notice the view in the distance....



What do you see?... What do you hear?... What do you smell?... Notice what is in front of you.... Make the temperature comfortable.... Be safe here.... Look around for a special spot, a private spot.... Find the path to this place.... Feel the ground with your feet.... Look above you.... What do you see?...hear?...smell?... Walk down this path until you can enter your own quiet, comfortable, safe place.

You have arrived at your special place.... What is under your feet?... How does it feel?... Take several steps.... What do you

❖ **food for thought**

God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot  
change, the courage to change  
the things I can, and the  
wisdom to know the difference.

— a soldier's prayer  
from the 14th century

❖ **food for thought**

The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is boundless.

—Jean Jacques Rousseau

see above you?... What do you hear?... Do you hear something else?... Reach and touch something....What is its texture?... Are there pens, paper, paints nearby, or is there sand to draw in and clay to play with?... Go to them, handle them, feel them. These are your special tools to reveal ideas or feelings to you...

Sit or lie in your special place.... Notice its smells...sound... sights.... This is your place and nothing can harm you here.... If danger is here, get rid of it.... You are alone and safe here. No one can come here unless invited.... Now spend 3 to 5 minutes feeling relaxed, safe, and comfortable.

Remember the smells, tastes, sights, sounds of this place.... You can come back and relax here whenever you want.... Leave by the same path.... Notice the ground, touch things near you.... Look far away and take in the view.... Remind yourself that you can come to this special place whenever you wish. Say to yourself, "I can relax here," or "This is my special place. I can come here whenever I wish."

If you can't see anything, that is fine. Just notice the nice feelings in your body as you relax.

Now open your eyes and spend a little while enjoying being relaxed.

You can write about your special place in your journal.

## Changing self-talk

Almost all day, we talk to ourselves inside our heads. What do you say to yourself? Do you ever say, “What a dummy,” to yourself when you have done something wrong? Maybe you say, “I’m so stupid!” when you’ve dropped something, or have forgotten to do something. When you say these things to yourself, it makes you tense and stressed. If you say these things often enough, you begin to believe them.

We say things that make us feel bad about ourselves. Most of the time we don’t even know that we are doing it. Sometimes others put us down and we begin to believe what they say. These are called “put-downs.” Others put us down, and we begin to believe them.

Below, write the answers to these questions or tell someone:

When do you feel bad about yourself? Why does this happen? Who is with you?

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### ♣ food for thought

To be at peace with ourselves,  
we need to know ourselves.

—Caitlin Matthews

What kinds of things would you like to do? Have you stopped yourself from trying because you thought you couldn't do them very well?



❖ **food for thought**

I want to sing like the birds sing,  
not worrying who hears or what  
they think.

—Rumi

Now try changing your self-talk.

**STEP 1:** In box 1, on page 63, write about a time this week when you felt bad.

**STEP 2:** In box 2, write what you said to yourself when you felt bad.

**STEP 3:** In box 3, write something good that you would rather say.

The second row of boxes show you an example.

## *The ways I talk to myself*

Whenever you notice you are thinking bad things about yourself, switch to a good thought.

Box 1	Box 2	Box 3
<p><b>What I was doing.</b></p> <p><i>I made some spelling mistakes in my writing class.</i></p>	<p><b>What I said to myself.</b></p> <p><i>I'm so stupid. I never get anything right.</i></p>	<p><b>If I am my own best friend, this is what I'd say.</b></p> <p><i>I can learn to spell better. It's OKAY for me to make mistakes.</i></p>





## Thought-stopping<sup>14</sup>

This activity helps you get rid of the worrying you do every day.

**STEP 1:** "Hold" the worrying thought that you are thinking about.

**STEP 2:** Close your eyes and focus on the thought.

**STEP 3:** Count to three.

**STEP 4:** Shout out loud "Stop!" If others are around you, say "Stop!" just to yourself. Or, imagine a huge STOP sign or a flashing red light.

**STEP 5:** If the worrying thought comes back, do steps 1 to 4 again.

**STEP 6:** Go back to what you were doing before the thought came.

Here are some things you can do next:

- Focus on what you were doing before the thought came.
- Think about something good happening to you.
- Get busy.
- Say: "It's not helpful. I don't want to worry anymore."

## Journal of good things

Our self-esteem improves when we say good things about ourselves. If one good saying helps, try more.

In a journal, write down all the good things that you did in a week. You can also write down all the good things people have said to you, or done for you. A good time to do this is just before you go to bed at night. You will go to sleep thinking positive thoughts about yourself. If you keep doing this every night, your list will get longer and longer.



### ❖ food for thought

Your voice takes you  
to your heart.

—Gabriele Roth

You can also list all the good qualities and skills you have. One person wrote this list:

- I am friendly.
- I can play pool well.
- I can tell a good story.
- I am helpful, especially with other students in my literacy program.



Post your list on the wall where you can see it every day. Then read it aloud to yourself until you know it by heart. Keep adding to your list as you think of more ideas. Soon you will know this in your head, and you won't need the list anymore.



## Practicing for stressful times

Think of a situation or activity that is coming up for you. It could be anything that you will be nervous about. For example, think of telling a friend that you don't like something she does. Or you might be getting ready to write a test. Picture yourself feeling calm and relaxed in that situation.

*I have chosen to visit my mother more often, but for shorter periods of time. This way, the time I spend will have more quality and I can leave when my anxiety overwhelms me. My dad visits her every day, feeds her every meal, changes all her diapers and gives her medication that is not taken orally. He is my hero and defines the commitment of marriage. My mom will never die alone, that gives me some comfort.*

—Jennifer Ellenwood

**STEP 1:** Close or lower your eyes and take a few calm, slow breaths. Picture tension leaving your body. Take 1 or 2 minutes to do this.

**STEP 2:** Imagine yourself doing the activity, whatever it is.

**STEP 3:** Focus on feeling relaxed while you picture yourself doing it.

**STEP 4:** Imagine the place where you are doing it. Who is there? What are they doing? What does the place look like? What are you wearing?

**STEP 5:** Picture yourself being very calm and relaxed as you do the activity.

**STEP 6:** Imagine something good that will happen afterwards.

Practice this 2 times a day for 5 minutes each time. The best time is when your mind is relaxed. Try it when you first wake up in the morning, right after you do one of the breathing exercises. You can also do it when you go to bed at night, just before you fall asleep.

## Meditating

Meditating is a way to quiet our bodies and minds. We can focus on one thing. It can be a word, a sound, or group of words, called a **mantra**.

We can focus on an object like a candle flame or a flower. We can focus on our breathing. We can focus on anything. We do this so that our minds become more still and quiet. Our thinking slows down when our minds are relaxed. We find the quiet that is within us. We feel at peace.

When our minds focus on something like our breathing, we can't think of anything else. Meditating helps with anxiety, depression, and anger. Meditating works best if we do a little every day.

### ❖ food for thought

Some examples of mantras that you can say:

- "Relax" or "peace"
- "I am calm."
- The sound "OM"



## *How to meditate*

### Getting ready to meditate

**STEP 1:** Find a time to meditate that is best for you. To begin, start with 2 to 5 minutes of meditating. When you feel more comfortable, you can work up to 15 to 20 minutes a day.

**STEP 2:** Be comfortable. You can sit in a chair with your back straight and your head relaxed. Or you can sit on a pillow on the floor with your legs crossed in front of you. If you lie down, you might fall asleep instead of meditating.

**STEP 3:** Close your eyes. If that doesn't feel OKAY for you, look gently down towards your heart. Breathe evenly and smoothly.

**STEP 4:** Notice where your body feels tense or tight. Each time you breathe out, imagine those areas softening and relaxing.

**STEP 5:** Notice where your breath wants to go in your body. When you breathe in, is it up high in your chest? Is it down low in your belly? Feel your belly fill up as the air goes in. It will relax as the breath goes out.

### Beginning to meditate

As you breathe out, say a word to yourself, such as "peace" or "relax." Or focus on an object, such as a candle flame. If you begin to think of other things, gently let the thoughts go. Bring your attention back to your breath, word, or object.

Get ready to stop meditating. Stretch your body a little or sit quietly for a few minutes.

### ❖ food for thought

The time to relax is when you don't have time for it.

—Sydney J. Harris



## *Breath-counting meditation*<sup>15</sup>

Following the breath in and out helps us feel peaceful and rested.

**STEP 1:** Sit in a comfortable position.

**STEP 2:** Take a few deep breaths. Either close your eyes or look on a spot on the floor about 4 feet in front of you.

**STEP 3:** Take deep, but not forced breaths into your belly. As you do, focus your attention on each part of the breath: the breath in, the moment in between breaths, the breath out, the moment in between breaths.

**STEP 4:** As you breathe out, say '1'. Keep on counting each outward breath: '2...3...4'. When you get to '4', start at '1' again. If you lose count, simply start over.

**STEP 5:** When your mind wanders, gently go back to the counting of your breath.

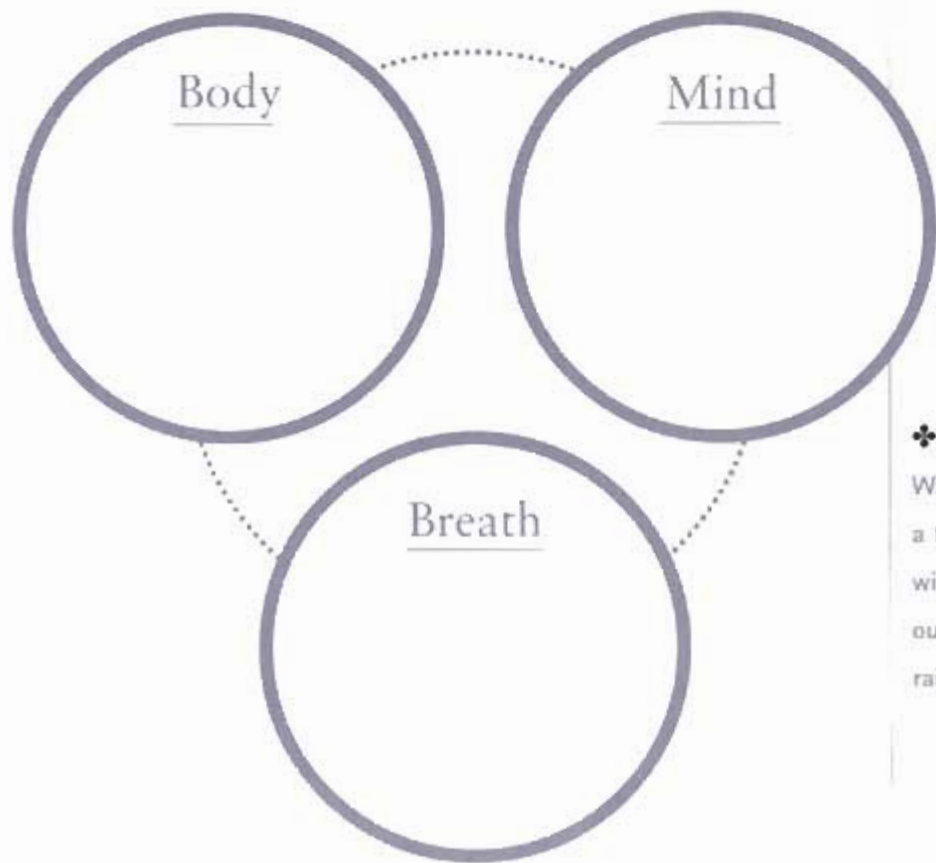
You can change your thinking to feel better about yourself. Most of the exercises here can be done anytime—such as when you are waiting in line at the bus stop, or at a grocery store. Even for a short time, the more you practice, the more you find yourself smiling. You will feel less stressed and have more energy.

### ❖ food for thought

Be content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.  
When you realize there is  
nothing lacking, the whole  
world belongs to you.

—Lao Tzu

You can try different combinations of exercises to calm the body, mind, and breath. For example, you can do the Letting-Go-of-Tension exercise first. Then you can do Breath-Counting. Follow that by meditating right before you go to bed. After you try different exercises, write the ones you like best the circles below. •



❖ **food for thought**

Walk on rainbow trail; walk on a trail of song, and all about you will be beauty. There is a way out of every dark mist, over a rainbow trail.

— Navajo Song