

## **Brief steps for managing stress**

- Understand what stress is
- Know what causes stress
- Spot the warning signs
- Learn strategies and techniques for coping with stress
  - Relaxation, meditation, breathing, yoga, visualisation, water (showers, singing in, swimming), changes in thinking, physical exercise and activity, music, artistic creation, spiritual space, sharing, cathartic emotional release
- Spot inappropriate coping strategies
- Decide and work on what is changeable

# STRESS CHAIN & STRESS IDENTIFICATION

*STRESS → STRAIN → Change in Performance → Which can lead to further STRESS → Further STRAIN and so on.*

STRAIN is often generated by 'Lifestyle Stresses':-

1. **PERFORMANCE STRESSES -**

Sources of stress inherent in carrying out a piece of mental or physical behaviour.

2. **THREAT STRESSES -**

Arise from situations perceived and assessed as dangerous  
e.g. exams, handling problem people at work, losing job, change etc.

3. **BOREDOM STRESSES -**

Arise from situations perceived and assessed as lacking in physical or mental stimulation.

4. **FRUSTRATION STRESSES -**

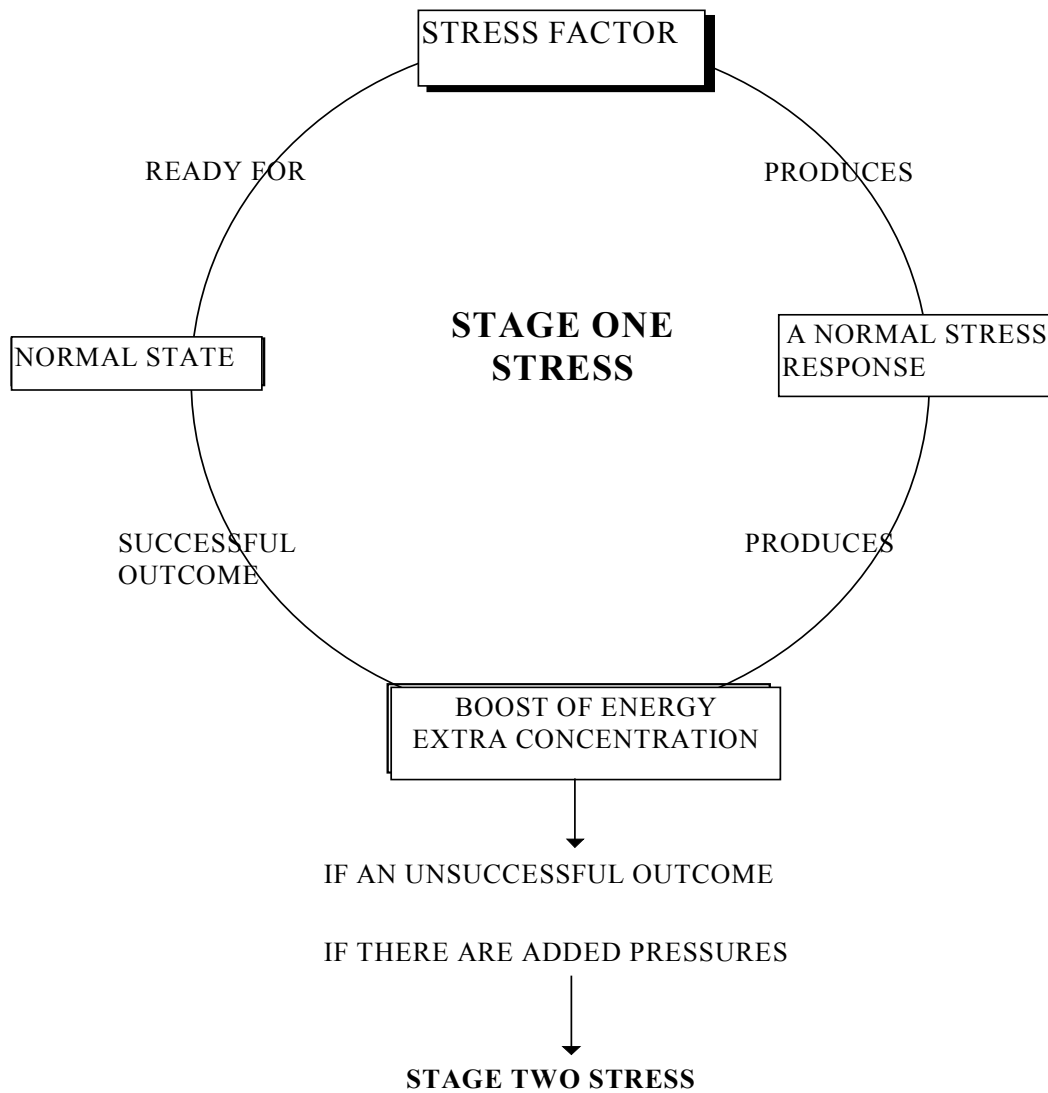
Arise from situations perceived and assessed as being undesirable but beyond one's power to control. E.g. moving goal posts.

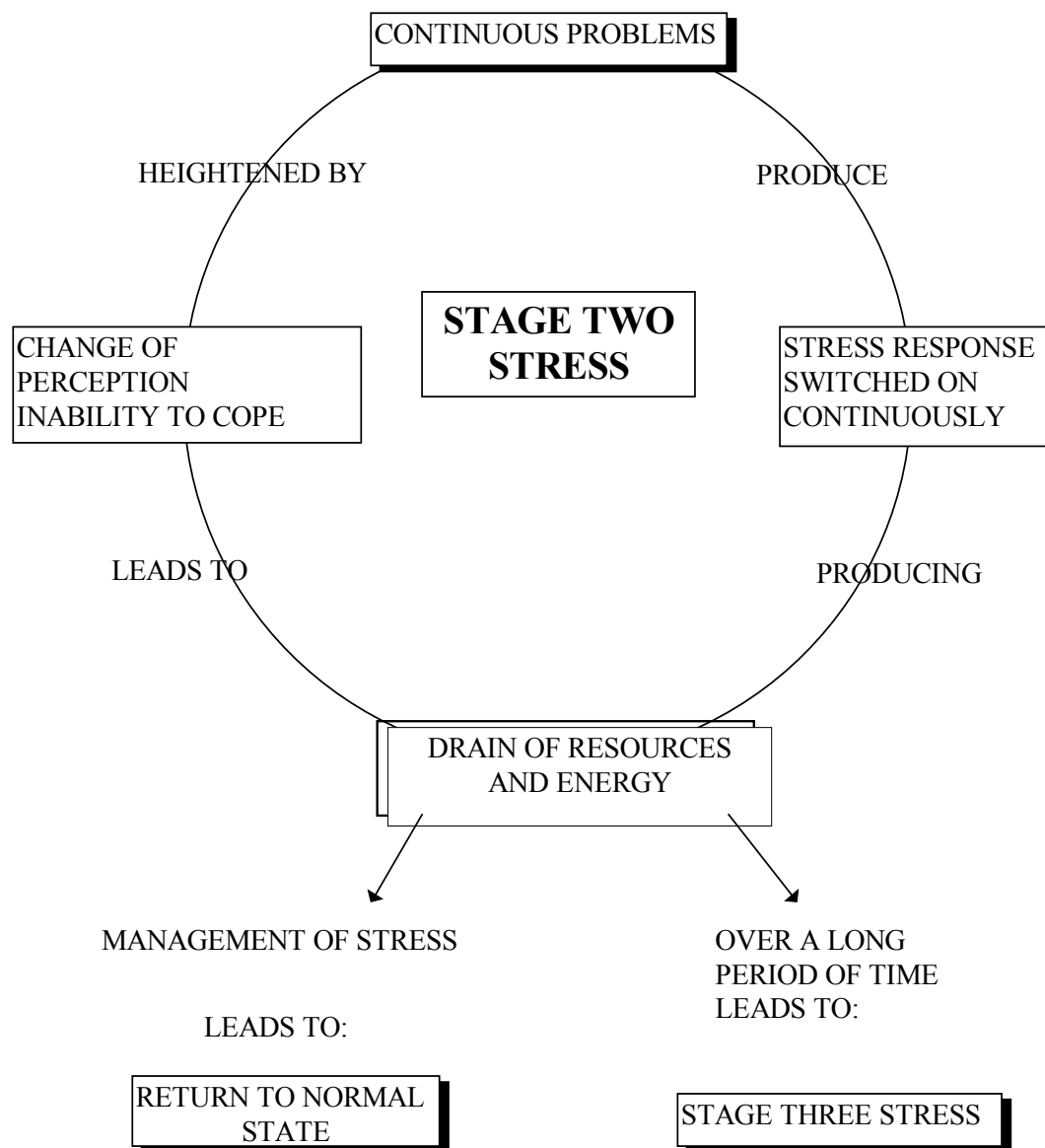
5. **BEREAVEMENT STRESSES -**

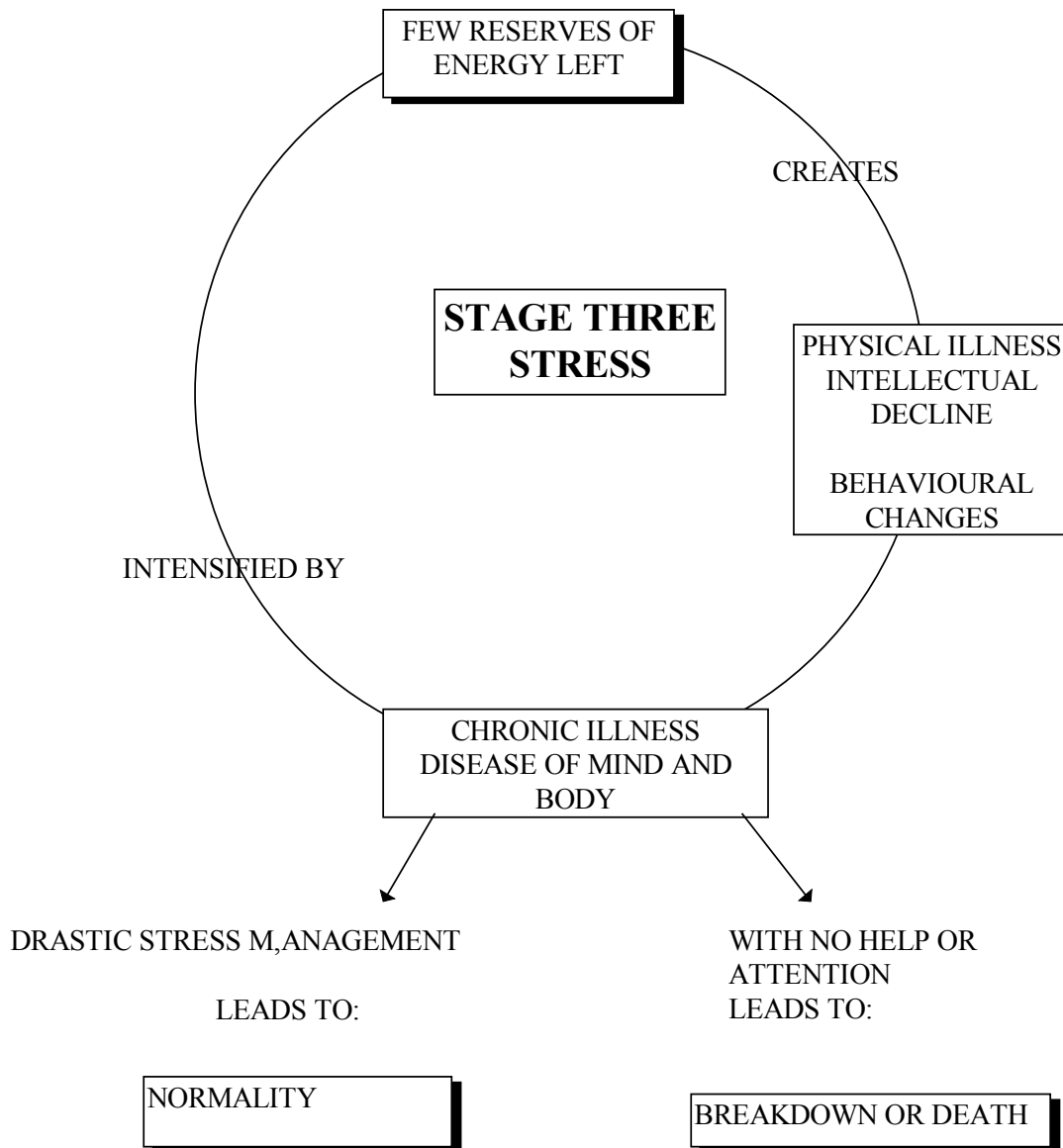
Arise from situations perceived and assessed as resulting in any kind of loss. E.g. not getting promotion This can include situations of change.

6. **PHYSICAL STRESSES -**

These involve actual physical damage to the person. Include headache, etc.



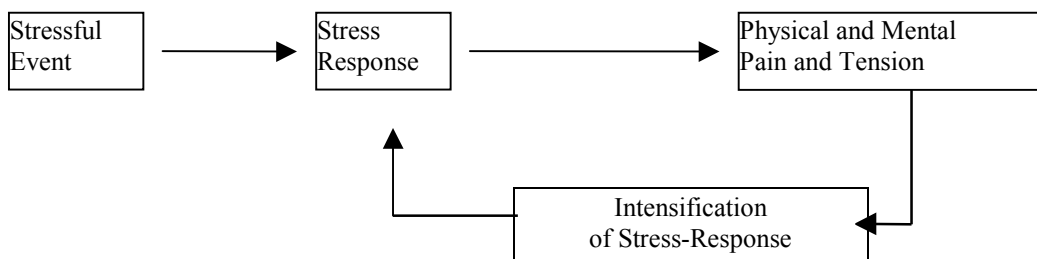




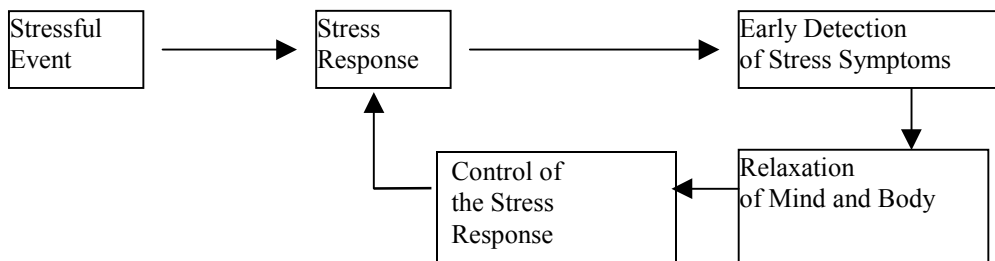
## ‘Unstressing’ Your Mind

The essence of a good Stress Control Plan is a reprogramming of your mind and body’s responses to stress.

This is the unhealthy pattern of stress response.



A self-intensifying cycle is established in response to a stressful event and it leads ultimately to destructive stress overload. We must learn to reprogram the mind and body responses to stress as follows:



## SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

### PSYCHOLOGICAL

Tense

Anxious

Worried

Depressed

Panicky

Tearful

Pressurised

Unable to relax

Overwhelmed

Loss of confidence

Self doubt

Any others?

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### BEHAVIOURAL

Over-eating

Over-drinking

Not eating

Absence from work

Insomnia

Taking tranquillisers

Short tempered

Unusually aggressive

Unusually impatient

Switching off

Opting out

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### PHYSICAL

Headaches/Migraines

Back pains

Stomach disorders

Hives/other skin disorders

Coughs and colds

Gastric ulcers

High blood pressure

Heart disease

Asthma

Fatigue/exhaustion

Muscle tension

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## THE PHYSIOLOGY OF STRESS

### WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING TO THE BODY WHEN IT IS UNDER STRESS?

Our bodies' reaction to stress is rooted in our ancestry. In earlier times, stress had a survival value. All animals have in their make-up an emergency reaction to get themselves out of danger quickly. This is what is often called the 'Fight or Flight' or 'Alarm' reaction. When the mind perceives a threat the 'Alarm Button' or hypothalamus in the brain is pressed. The brain then sends out messages to different parts of the body, which is immediately prepared for action, system by system.

1. The muscles - become tense.
2. The adrenal glands - these are situated above our kidneys and release stress hormones to get the reaction going and sustain it.
3. The heart - beats faster. Blood pressure rises. The major blood vessels dilate and more blood is therefore sent to vital organs e.g. the muscles needed to run away or to fight.
4. The lungs - faster breathing increases the oxygen supply to produce energy, and eliminate the waste carbon dioxide.
5. The liver - releases glycogen (stored sugar) into the blood supply, raising blood glucose for energy.
6. Stored fats - are released, again for use as energy by the muscles.
7. The skin - sweats to keep us cool.
8. The eyes - pupil dilates to improve our sideways vision to find a way of escape.
9. The digestive system - slows down and almost stops temporarily, as the blood is diverted to more important organs e.g. muscles. The food stays longer in the stomach, the bowel slows down and the bowel sphincters close.
10. The bladder sphincters close.

There are many other changes, but these are the most important.

This reflex was a life-saver for our prehistoric ancestors who had to 'fight' or 'flee' regularly to save their lives. Occasionally, it is useful for us if we need to respond very rapidly on a physical level to a threat - for example, if we are charged by a bull whilst sitting in field! A surge of energy will help us reach the gate in time.

It is an emergency reaction for use in the short term only, followed by a time for 'winding down' after the chase or the fight, during which the affected organs in the body can return to normal.

Problems develop when the reaction is sustained for longer periods of time as happens too frequently in the present day. The perceived 'threats' in modern society are less likely to be physical attacks on us. Rather, they take the form of psychological pressures resulting from the many different and often conflicting demands made on us, as we attempt to fulfil expectations laid on us in our various roles as workers, parents, partners, colleagues, friends etc. When experiencing 'distress' the body systems are put out of balance and then remain in this state, resulting all too often in ill health.

The irony is that what was intended as a life saving reflex is now one of the major causes of serious illness in our society.

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## SOURCES OF STRESS

### **Personal Life**

- (1) Personal relationships.
- (2) Illness - in self or in one close to self.
- (3) Recent bereavement.
- (4) Race related stress - victim of racist attitudes/behaviour.
- (5) Financial worries.
- (6) Loneliness

### **Colleagues**

- (1) Inability to create relationships.
- (2) Lack of support.
- (3) 'Each doing their own thing' - no teamwork.
- (4) Open conflict - practice undermined.
- (5) Oppressive / discriminatory behaviour, including racism / sexism.
- (6) Bringing home problems to work - influences personality.
- (7) Own anxieties about work.
- (8) Resentful of other's positions - professional 'jealousy'.
- (9) Negative/pessimistic attitudes to work.

### **Managers**

- (1) Lack of support - no supervision etc.
- (2) No attention paid to personal development.
- (3) 'Routines' before 'people'.
- (4) Little positive feedback.
- (5) Oppressive / discriminatory behaviour, including racism / sexism.
- (6) Given inappropriate client group, caseload etc. Practice skills not recognised.
- (7) Overworked, heavy demands.
- (8) Faced with crises.
- (9) Lack of involvement in decision making.

### **Organisational Issues**

- (1) Lack of resources.
- (2) 'Routines' before 'people' - bureaucracy.
- (3) Impersonal links with 'hierarchy'.
- (4) Poor pay/poor conditions of service.
- (5) 'Equal Opportunities' not a reality.
- (6) Mismatch between social work task and administrative structure.
- (7) Little social work 'expertise'.
- (8) Administrative procedures/paperwork.
- (9) Methods to meet inflexible organisational resources - not resources used to meet needs.
- (10) Lack of clarity of what's done - low status.
- (11) Staffing ratios.
- (12) Staff shortages/vacancies not filled.
- (13) Lack of clarity in roles.

## METHODS OF COPING WITH STRESS

### 1. Diet

Ensure you have a balanced, nutritional diet.

### 2. Sleep

Try to keep to a regular sleeping pattern - and to ensure that you sleep enough hours to enable you to wake refreshed in the morning. Most people need 7-8 hours sleep a night -making this a priority will help give you the energy to cope with other aspects of life.

### 3. Organise Your Time

'Brainstorm' all you feel you have to do, whether it be in the short, medium or long term. Then prioritise. Determine what has to be done to day - what can be postponed till tomorrow - or next week. Most importantly, what actually does not need to be done - or can be delegated to someone else. Spend 10 minutes each day reviewing this list, and bringing it up to date. Be realistic! Only plan to do what is manageable in the time at your disposal.

### 4. Plan Each Day

Organise each day. Learn what time of day you are at your best. Ensure you eat breakfast whether or not you feel like it - this will energise your body, and help you to cope physically and mentally with the day ahead.

Ensure you have regular rest periods - however pressurised take 10 minutes where you can completely cut off from your work. Go for a walk, sit somewhere on your own and RELAX. Eat regularly and wisely.

### 5. Examine Your Lifestyle

Do you try too much? Imagine that you are a stranger who is looking at you from a distance. What advice would you give?

### 6. Practice Mental Detachment

Learn to 'switch off' if you are feeling too pressurised by those around you, or if you find yourself in a boring situation which you cannot escape e.g. a traffic jam. Take yourself mentally to somewhere you would rather be. Concentrate on yourself. Consciously make efforts to relax all parts of your body and mind and think yourself into the most pleasant situation you can imagine.

Do not worry what others may think - your physical and mental health is the most important.

## **Methods Of Coping With Stress (contd.)**

### **7. Take Positive Efforts to Improve Your Self-Image**

You are as valuable and worthwhile a human being as anyone else! Challenge anyone who tries to put you down. Remember that those who put others down have a lot to learn themselves.

### **8. Learn to be Assertive**

That is, learn to say firmly "No I'm sorry, I have not the time, space, mental/physical energy to do this/take this on/ cope with this". Do not be ashamed to admit that you cannot do all that is demanded of you.

### **9. Relax!**

Take positives moves to find means of relaxing that suits you. Sporting activities, hobbies, night classes, suit some. Explore methods you have not tried before - yoga, deep relaxation tapes, meditation.

Do not use 'lack of time' as a reason for not choosing a specific method of relaxation - the time spent on this will more than pay dividends for other aspects of your life.

### **10. Seek Support From Others**

Do not be afraid to ask for help, either from someone you know personally or with a professional counsellor. Sharing what you feel can in itself ease feelings of stress.

### **11. Alternative Medicines**

Read about alternative medicines which may help deal with symptoms of stress. If you feel they may suit you, then give them a try.

For example, homeopathy, Bach flower remedies, hypnotherapy.

### **12. Put Yourself First**

If you are not OK then you are not going to be much use to others, however responsible you may feel for them. So your first responsibility is to your own welfare, and to ensuring that you are physically/mentally able to cope with your own day to day life. Only then will you be able effectively to help others to cope with theirs.

Making real attempts to implement some or all of the above techniques will help stress to be coped with more effectively.

## ABDOMINAL BREATHING

There is a close reciprocal relationship between breathing, the nervous system and the emotions. We know that fear, excitement, rage and agitation accelerate the rate of breathing which is the body's instinctive reaction to possible danger and preparation for struggle or escape. However, many of us are not aware that the process may be consciously reversed.

The nerves can be calmed and agitation or anger subdued by a deliberate slowing of the breathing rate. You can change your mental and emotional state by the way in which you breathe.

Practice this simple exercise daily. It will help you regain a calm and relaxed frame of mind and will help you to experience a few moments of stillness during a busy day. By knowing this relaxed state, you will recognise when you are moving far away from it, and be able to take some avoiding action before stress takes a hold.

In this exercise we aim to:

1. Use abdominal breathing.
2. Slow down the rate of breathing to 5-6 breaths per minute.
3. Balance the length of 'in' and 'out' breaths.
4. When this is achieved, try to make the out breath longer.
5. Relax the upper thorax.

### Breathing Exercise

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position - loosening any tight clothing.
2. Put the hands lightly on the abdomen with fingertips touching.
3. Thoroughly exhale by drawing the abdomen in so making the fingertips move together.
4. Inhale gently through the nose, allowing the diaphragm to lower and abdomen to swell, so parting the fingertips. As the inhalation continues, the lower part of the chest is expanded, so moving the ribs sideways.
5. Hold the breath in for a moment, and become aware of the expansion low down in the lungs.
6. Exhale from the base of the lungs first. The abdomen will draw in as the diaphragm lifts, and the fingertips will move together. The ribs will relax inwards as the lower lungs empty. Remain for a moment with the lungs empty before repeating the process several times until it begins to feel natural.

You will become aware of the wave like motion of the diaphragm as air is drawn in and flows out. With some practice, you will become comfortable with this abdominal breathing, and be able to practise it while walking, sitting or lying.

Aim to breathe in for the count of four heart beats, hold for two beats, breathe out for four, and remain with the lungs empty for two beats. Extend the out breath to give a 4 - 2 - 6 - 2 rhythm when you feel ready.

When you are first learning this exercise, it is helpful to do it with the eyes closed, and to visualise the breath flowing in and flowing out.

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## RELAXATION EXERCISES

### **Physical relaxation:**

1. Helps to cut down fatigue, and improve recovery from fatigue.
2. Improves sleep.
3. Provides a tool to help cope with excessive anxiety and tension.
4. Aids healing and the easing of pain.

### **Loosening movements**

Sit on an armless chair or stool, keep your back straight and start with your head will balanced on top of you spine.

### **Hands:**

- \* Let your arms hang loosely between your knees or by your sides. Shake you hands vigorously as though shaking off water.

### **Shoulders:**

- \* Imagine that someone is lifting you by the shoulders, and that they suddenly let go. Let your shoulders drop quickly.
- \* Imagine you are carrying two heavy weights, and your shoulders are being pulled down. Drop the weights.
- \* Push your shoulders forward six times, then back six times.
- \* Roll you shoulders alternately, first forward six times, then backward six times.

### **Neck:**

- \* Pretend you neck is broken, and allow your head to drop forward; imaging it is getting heavier. Pretend someone puts a hand under your forehead, and raises it slowly back with no effort on your part.
- \* Lower you head gently to the right, allowing it to sink fully under its own weight. Imaging someone lifts it gently up again for you. Repeat to the left.
- \* Gently turn you head from side to side, trying to look behind you, three or four times each way.

### **Ankles:**

- \* Take off your shoes; cross your knees and slowly rotate each ankle in turn, six or seven times in each direction.

### **Thighs:**

- \* Press your knees and thighs firmly together, then quickly release them, and allow your legs to flop apart.

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