

These self-care strategies form a set of exercises or ideas that can be shared with young people to give them a range of tools, which will help them manage different difficult situations. The strategies can be revisited time and again, and with repetition will become even more effective.

At the end of each session a “looking after yourself” strategy will have been selected and will be worked through together. This will allow the young person to not only build up a range of tools to look after themselves but will give them the opportunity to ‘de-brief’ from each session, leaving with a positive strategy for self-care.

### Extended exhale breathing

**Explanation:** When we feel stressed or anxious our bodies respond to this with a range of physical changes. Most of these happen without us being able to control it, but one of the changes is to our breathing. When we are calm we breathe in a particular way and when we become anxious or stressed our breathing changes to become shallower, quicker and higher in the chest. We can hack this system by deliberately learning how to breathe in a calm way – this will then trigger the relaxation response and help our bodies – and our minds – feel calmer. When we are calmer we are much more able to respond to things in ways that are more useful.

**How to do it:** There are just two things to do to stimulate the relaxation response: Firstly, breathe from your belly – imagine there is a balloon in your tummy that you are inflating with every inbreath – this is easiest to practise lying on your back with one hand on your chest and the other on your tummy. Your tummy should move out with each inbreath, whereas your chest shouldn't move much.

Secondly, make the outbreath longer than the inbreath – you could count (7 in and 11 out – or 5-8 or a number that works for you), or have a phrase to say (a shorter one for the inbreath and a longer one for the outbreath, such as ‘I am calm’ (on the inbreath) and then ‘I am feeling very relaxed’ (on the outbreath)). You could also imagine yourself playing a recorder or singing, as that uses the same breathing action.

**When it's useful:** This can be useful when you start to feel anxious or if something happens that produces a strong emotional response. It's a skill, though, so it's easier to do if you practise it when you're already feeling calm. If you do this, you will have more control over your responses when you begin to feel anxious. You could try practising this kind of breathing for a couple of minutes once or twice a day – maybe as you are going to sleep or before you get out of bed in the morning. It's good to do when you know you have a difficult event coming up, for example before an exam or a difficult conversation.



## The 5-4-3-2-1 technique

**Explanation:** This is a grounding technique that comes from mindfulness and is useful because it is quick, easy and you can do it at almost any time or place to make an immediate difference. In fact, it takes less time to do than it takes to explain!

**How to do it:** First, notice five things you can see, then (and if you like you can shut your eyes, but you don't have to) notice four things you can feel – this can be things like your feet on the ground or your sleeve on your arm, or could also be internal things like feeling hungry. Now notice three things you can hear, then two things you can either smell or taste. Finally take one deep breath from your belly, with a longer outbreath, and then open your eyes (if they were closed). If you notice your thoughts drifting, don't worry, just gently bring them back to the exercise.

**When it's useful:** Any time you want to take a moment away and reset your emotions. Because you can do it anywhere, people won't even know that you're doing it. You can vary it with other techniques, such as noticing everything around you that's a particular colour or shape.



## Journalling

**Explanation:** By writing down our thoughts we get them out of our heads and often this means they stay out of our heads. It also helps us sort our thoughts out and even come up with solutions to problems. By putting our thoughts into words we start to make sense of them and we also notice how thoughts and feelings come and go.

**How to do it:** There are lots of different ways to try this beyond the stereotype of writing a daily diary entry. The purpose is to take some time to record your thoughts and feelings. You could have a lovely notebook, or you could type on your laptop, you could record voice messages. You could do it every day or just when you feel the need. The best thing to do is experiment and find what works the best for you.

**When it's useful:** This is something to do when you're on your own and wanting to make sense of how you feel. The more often you do it the easier it gets, and the more things seem to make sense.



## The AWARE technique

**Explanation:** The emotion of anxiety is there to protect us and to keep us safe, but it can get out of hand. Sometimes it stops us from doing the things that are good for us or that we want to do. Sometimes the anxiety voice is very loud and it often wants you to avoid doing the very thing that will make you feel better. This is particularly true when it triggers social anxiety. It feels as though doing what the voice is telling us, for example not going out, will quieten that voice, but in fact the opposite is true. The more the anxiety voice has its own way, the stronger it gets.

This technique allows you to challenge the anxiety voice making it less powerful.

**How to do it:** AWARE stands for five things to do when you notice the anxiety voice getting louder.

**A** **Accept** and acknowledge the feelings of anxiety. Recognise them. It's ok – there they are. They are not you. You can even name the anxiety voice if it's helpful. (Ideally, give it a silly name: "Oh that's just Mr Worryhead again.")

**W** **Watch**, wait and scale. What is it wanting you to do/not do? How loud is it on a scale of 0-10? – It doesn't matter what the number is but giving it a number means you can see it going up and down which reminds the brain that it is temporary and variable.

**A** **As you were:** act normally – keep doing whatever you were planning to do. Try not to let the anxiety voice have its way.

**R** **Repeat.** Back to the first A and acceptance, scale it again, keep resisting whatever the anxiety voice wants you to do/not do.

**E** **Expect** the best – this feeling will pass. It will be ok. You know the anxiety voice when it gets like this and it's usually lying. The world won't end and you'll feel better and calmer again soon – especially if you can manage to push back against the anxiety voice and what it wants you to do.

**When it's useful:** This is particularly useful for social anxiety or when anxiety makes us want to avoid things that we need to do or that are good for us – like meeting up with good friends, learning new skills, taking exercise or going to school or particular lessons, etc. If we can challenge the anxiety we definitely feel better and it's easier to do those things again next time.



## A positive spin

**Explanation:** Noticing the good things in life encourages the brain to notice more good things and helps us feel more positive. When bad things have happened it's really easy to only notice bad things and to feel like nothing good will ever happen again. This is your brain trying to protect you and keep you safe, but it's got caught in a loop and it needs you to restore the balance. It needs you to find the positive things again.

**How to do it:** There are lots of different ways to do this; you could try any the examples below. Set aside a few minutes every day to record one of the following:

- List up to three good things that happened today.
- List up to three hobbies and activities that bring me joy and why.
- Describe my favourite location in my house and why I like it.
- One thing I've learned this week that I'm thankful for.
- Who or what made me smile in the past 24 hours and why?
- Describe my favourite smell/sound/sensation/taste/sight – in as much detail as possible.
- Write about someone famous who has helped my life in some way.
- Name a great book I've recently read/tv show I've watched/song I've listened to and why?
- What is today's weather and one positive thing I can say about it?
- When was the last time I had a genuine belly laugh and why was it so funny?
- What's one lesson I can learn from rude people?
- What makes me happy when I'm feeling down.
- Look around the room and list all the items that I like.
- Write about a challenging person in my life for example, someone I frequently disagree with, and the qualities I like about this person.

**When it's useful:** If you have some time to yourself and you're feeling a bit down, or it feels like things are going wrong, this will help reset the brain to notice some of the positives in life as well. It's something you can do on your own, but you could also try doing it with a friend or trusted adult.



## Thoughts like buses

**Explanation:** We are not our thoughts. Just because you think something or something crosses your mind doesn't make it true. But often when we think negative and destructive thoughts they feel very real and we can get caught up in the same thoughts going round and round, causing more upset, misery and distress. But we have more control over our thoughts than you might think!

**How to do it:** Let's imagine that you are sitting on a lovely bench in your favourite place in nature. It also happens to be a bus stop. You can see the buses coming and going, and on the front of every bus is the destination – these are your thoughts. You don't have to get on every bus that comes by – you can choose. If you see a familiar bus arriving that you don't like, you don't have to get on – you already know where it goes and how it goes round and round. It's not taking you anywhere of value, so stay on your bench. Maybe choose another bus – a bus where you remember a really good holiday, or your favourite food, or one where you plan something nice to do. If you find yourself on the wrong bus, you can just ring the bell and get off and come back to that bench.

**When it's useful:** This can be done when you feel your thoughts running away with you on a negative spiral – perhaps a thought you've had many times before. Reminding ourselves that we don't have to just accept every thought as it appears helps reset the brain. It can take a bit of practice, but the more you reset yourself and come back to the bench, the more your brain gets the message that you don't have to have these unhelpful thoughts. Another way of looking at it is to think of your thoughts like clouds – you are the sky above. The clouds may cover the sky sometimes, and some stick around longer than others, but they are not you and they always pass in the end.



## Sleep hygiene

**Explanation:** It really is true that we feel better about things when we get enough sleep. This is because while we are asleep the body and mind are still busy with physical repair and emotional processing. Sleep helps us sort things out and resets both body and mind. We all need good sleep to help us manage the ups and downs of everyday life but sometimes our sleep can be interrupted. Stress and worry can affect our sleep, and young people are even more disadvantaged because their bodies want to sleep when society expects them to be awake and at school! There are lots of different things we can do to help promote good sleep – you don't have to do all of these, but if you are having trouble sleeping it's worth trying some of them and seeing what works for you.

### How to do it:

- Try to keep to a routine – keep your bedtimes and getting up times reasonably stable as this encourages the brain to be ready for both sleeping and waking up.
- A pre-bed routine also helps the brain to recognise that it's time for sleep. Things like –
  - Reading or music for around ten minutes before lights out.
  - A hot bath or shower.
  - A warm milky drink.
  - Turning off any screens at least an hour before lights out.
  - Audio books – so long as you can turn them off or set them only for a short time.
- Keep your bedroom temperature cool as the body needs to lower its core temperature to sleep.
- Avoid caffeine after 2pm – especially important if you feel anxious as caffeine mimics the anxiety response so can make you feel worse.
- Try to have a quick tidy in your bedroom before you prepare for sleep as this will help your brain put thoughts from the day aside.
- Keep a pad and pen by your bed to record worries so you can dismiss them until the next day.
- When you get up, open the curtains and get lots of light – morning light helps keep us awake when we need to be and regulates the sleep rhythms.
- White noise can help sleep, whether it's a fan or the sound of a rainforest.
- Exercise during the day will help make you physically tired and also burns cortisol (the stress hormone).
- Healthy eating and not eating anything very rich or sugary before bed can also make a difference.

**When it's useful:** If you are having trouble sleeping or feeling tired during the day then it can be helpful to look at your sleep routines. Often just small tweaks can make a really big difference.



## The Worryspace

**Explanation:** If you find that you are spending a lot of time worrying about what's happening or feeling very negative and anxious, it's not always easy to turn these thoughts off. Giving them space but also boundaries can help. By giving your brain a dedicated time when you are allowed to worry – the worryspace – it can often be easier to dismiss the worries the rest of the time, saving them up for the worryspace. In repeating this exercise time and again it may be that when we get to our worryspace we find some of those things aren't so very worrisome anymore.

**How to do it:** Allocate a time in your week – maybe about 20-minutes, but no longer than an hour – when you are allowed to worry. During this time, think about the things that are making you worry and feel anxious – you can write them down, you can cry about them, you can feel overwhelmed, you can tell someone else about them. But only for that allocated timeframe. If you start to have these thoughts at other times, tell your brain that you will think about them in the worryspace. Make a note if you need to and then turn your thoughts to something else. If your brain knows that you will give it time then it will be more able to turn away from the worry when you don't want it there.

**When it's useful:** Any time when sad or worrying thoughts are stopping you from being able to get on with the things you need or want to do. Giving yourself dedicated time and permission to worry makes it easier to turn our thoughts to more useful things the rest of the time.





## Move more

**Explanation:** Two important things happen when we move our bodies that can help us feel happier in our minds as well as healthier in our bodies. Firstly, the body releases endorphins – chemicals that literally lift our mood. Evidence shows that even in people who have a diagnosis of mild to moderate depression just 150 minutes of movement a week is as effective at lifting their mood as taking medication. The other thing movement does is to burn off the stress hormone cortisol. This is released when we feel stressed or anxious and it tends to hang around in the body. By moving our bodies we burn this off which lifts those feelings of stress.

**How to do it:** The most important thing is to find something that works for you – you don't have to go running or visit the gym (though you can if you like). Walking, stretching, dancing to music at home, jumping up and down, swimming, rollerblading, playing Twister, doing star jumps, there are so many things you could try! Whatever works for you! And just five minutes will make a difference.

**When it's useful:** Good as part of your daily routine, but particularly good if you have a wave of strong emotions, such as anger, anxiety, unhappiness, panic, frustration etc. When using it to calm really strong emotions try something more intense, like jumping up and down or running on the spot really hard for five minutes. Over time, the more we move the better we generally feel.



## Mindfulness

**Explanation:** Anxiety and stress tend to focus on the past or the future – what’s happened already or what we want or don’t want to happen. Mindfulness is about bringing our thoughts into the moment, the right now. By bringing our attention to our thoughts, feelings and observations about right now we can calm the inner voice and reset ourselves.

**How to do it:** There are lots of different things you can try for this. Being creative is often a really good way of being in the moment – whether that’s drawing, baking, colouring or crafting. The point is just to be in the moment, so you can do it with any activity. Bring your attention to every detail of what your body is experiencing. For example, when you clean your teeth notice every tooth and the feel of the brush on your gums, pay attention to the taste of the toothpaste and imagine the shape of your mouth and the toothbrush. You can even eat a snack mindfully. Look at the snack first and smell it, observe the texture and colour. Then take a tiny bite and notice how it feels on your tongue and how it changes as you chew and prepare to swallow. Then try with a larger mouthful. Really take your time.

With any of these activities it’s really important that you don’t judge – it’s not about doing anything ‘right’ – it’s just about noticing what you are doing right now, being curious and interested and letting the past and the future just drift away for the moment.

**When it’s useful:** Mindfulness helps us step away from stress and anxiety. The more we practice, the easier it gets, and it can be a really calm place to be. It’s great to do at the end of the day as part of a wind-down; or as you get up to prepare yourself for the day ahead.

It’s also really useful if you just need a bit of time out during the day and it helps you focus your mind on something else.



## A hero's journey

**Explanation:** By framing our experiences as a story in which we are the hero is a powerful way to help us move through difficult experiences. In any good story there are chapters where our hero faces really difficult challenges and manages to overcome them. By looking at our own experiences in this way we can take control of where we want the story to go next.

**How to do it:** Ask the young person to think about what has happened as though it were a chapter in a story. It's important to remember that the central character (the young person) is the hero – we like them; we are on their side; we have faith in them. Remind them that they are still near the beginning of the book – there are lots of chapters still to come. Explore the different ways in which the next chapter may be written, finding as many ways as you can that lead to a positive outcome. Encourage reflection on all the different resources and strengths that our hero has – what can they do to overcome their challenges? What different ways will they find to recover from their experiences? Peek ahead to ten chapters, or twenty chapters further down the book – what is happening now? What skills and qualities does our hero have? How are they using these skills to create a life that works for them?

**When it's useful:** This is an effective way to put distance between a traumatic event and the person who has experienced it. When we feel stuck or defined by a situation it can be useful to see it as simply a chapter in a much longer narrative. It shapes the story but only as much as the author wants it to. This is about empowering people to move forward into recovery.



## Three chairs of perspective

**Explanation:** This is an exercise that manifests a compassionate voice that we can use to calm our inner critic. By imagining how we would support a friend in a similar situation we can encourage our own self-compassion.

**How to do it:** Arrange three empty chairs in your room. Ask the young person to think of something where they have blamed themselves – this may be to do with something that has happened to them but does not have to be. Each chair represents a different way of thinking about what has happened.

The first chair represents the young person's self-blame and the thoughts and emotions that go with that. The second chair represents the feelings that other people are judging you. The last chair takes the perspective of a supportive friend or wise counsellor.

Ask the young person to physically sit in each chair and express out loud what that perspective feels like. In each chair, the young person can use words or just noises to represent that perspective, but ask them to notice the tone of voice, the emotions that accompany the words and even the posture adopted in each chair. Try to understand how each perspective feels. When the young person is in chair 3 encourage them to talk directly to the emotions and thoughts expressed in chairs one and two. What do you say? What advice do you give? How do you relate to each perspective from a more detached point of view?

Don't spend too long in chairs one and two and always finish in chair three. Reflect to the young person that they already have the ability to use a more supportive voice to themselves. It can be helpful to give this voice, or aspect of themselves a name (a superhero name can be good, like 'Captain Calm' or 'Mrs Kindness') so that when they are feeling down on themselves they can step outside and ask, "What would Captain Calm say about this?"

**When it's useful:** This is great for young people who enjoy role playing or who struggle to understand others' points of view. It engages the observing self so that we can take a step back and be more compassionate to ourselves.



### Relaxing your body - Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

**Explanation:** When the body is tense, the mind is too, and where the body goes, often the mind follows. Therefore, if we are feeling stressed and anxious, one solution is to work on relaxing our bodies and notice that the mind also calms down as a result. One way of doing this is a progressive muscle relaxation exercise.

**How to do it:** Essentially, you bring your attention to the muscles in your body – starting either with the top of your head or with your feet – and then move through the body, consciously relaxing each muscle and muscle group as you go. It's a calming process that engages mindfulness and allows you to be more in tune with your body. If you are struggling to know how to relax, tense the muscles first and then relax them, so you can feel the difference. You can just do this in your own way or use the script if you want some direction. The practitioner or a parent/carer could read the script to help you relax or you could record it and play it to yourself when lying in bed getting ready for sleep. Don't rush through the script, take your time and pause as you allow different parts of your body to relax.

**When it's useful:** This is a great thing to do before going to sleep as it really relaxes both body and mind. If you want to do something similar during the day you can focus on one bit of your body – such as your hands – and just clench and relax your fists a few times.



### Script for a PMR (feel free to adapt and make your own):

I am going to direct your attention to your body and the different muscles in your body, starting with the top of your head. Focus your attention on the very top of your head. Be aware of how it feels and how your scalp feels across the top of your head and all around your hairline. Start to feel the muscles across your scalp relax and loosen. You can feel any tension melting away as your scalp loosens and relaxes. Move your attention to your forehead and let that relaxation wash down from your scalp and into your forehead and face. Across your forehead and your temples you can feel the muscles relaxing... relaxing and smoothing out... good. Your forehead feels smooth and comfortable and the whole of the top of your head is relaxed.

Now move your attention to your face. Feel the muscles round your eyes start to relax. All the small muscles around your eyes and your eyebrows are softening and relaxing. They are loosening and smoothing out. Your eyelids feel comfortable and at ease and the muscles around your eyes feel so comfortable. Now the muscles across your face and in your cheeks also start to relax. Your cheeks loosen and you can feel your jaw loosening and any tension in your jaw melting away... The muscles around and beneath your ears are softening as your jaw relaxes. Perhaps your mouth will open slightly as the muscles in your chin relax, and that's fine. Your tongue rests comfortably in your mouth and your face is relaxed.

Bring your attention to your neck now and the back of your neck. From your hairline at the back and down your neck, feel the muscles loosening and elongating. As the muscles soften, your neck feels comfortable and relaxed and your head feels light and easy just resting on your neck. If you want to move your head to the side or if your chin wants drop slightly that's fine... move if necessary so that your head and neck can enjoy feeling very relaxed. You feel very comfortable and your neck is relaxed and at ease.

As the muscles in your neck continue to relax you can feel this relaxation moving now into your shoulders as your attention moves down into your shoulders. Across your shoulders the muscles relax and your shoulders feel loose and comfortable. They feel relaxed and comfortable. If you want to just roll them gently as they relax that's fine.

Now feel the muscles in the tops of your arms relaxing, down to your elbows, and your arms are feeling heavy and comfortable as they relax and any tension drops away. Feel this warm comfortable sensation move down, through your elbows and down your lower arms... and into your hands. Your hands are relaxing, your palms feel soft and your fingers relax. All the muscles in your arms are now relaxed, all the way down to your fingertips, and you feel warm and comfortable....

Bring your attention now to your chest and to your breathing. Your breathing is even and relaxed. It is unforced and easy, and you can feel your breath moving in and out... in and out. Feel your chest area relax as you breathe in and out... in and out.... Good.

All the muscles between your ribs are relaxed and comfortable and just gently supporting your breathing as the breath moves in... and out... Your breath is moving easily and the muscles in your upper back and chest area are softening and relaxing... relaxing. Focus for a moment more on your breath; with every in-breath imagine the breath moving through your whole body, washing your whole body with a feeling of calm and peace... The breath moves easily and brings that relaxation through your entire body. With every out-breath, feel any tension melting away, leaving your body

more and more calm, more and more relaxed... so comfortable and so peaceful. In... and out.... In... and out... that's right. Your breath is calm and easy, you are peaceful and relaxed.

Breathe deeply now down into your stomach and feel your diaphragm and stomach relaxing too. Bring your attention fully to your stomach and feel your abdomen loosen and relax. Your stomach supports your breathing and each breath relaxes your stomach more.

As the abdomen relaxes with every breath you can feel your lower belly, your hips and the muscles in your lower back begin to soften... with every out-breath, your lower back is relaxing and feeling loose and easy. The muscles feel long, soft and comfortable and you feel so relaxed.

As these large muscles in your lower back soften and relax you can feel your hips and pelvic area relaxing more and more and down to the tops of your legs. Feel the long muscles of your thighs loosening and relaxing, your hamstrings relaxing and down into your knees. Your knees feel soft and comfortable and that feeling of relaxation moves down through your knees and into your calves and shins. Your legs feel warm, heavy and comfortable.

Your whole body feels relaxed and comfortable. Good. Feel your ankles relax and soften and feel this easing of tension move finally into your feet. Let your feet relax. Feel your instep smoothing and the arch of your feet softening. The muscles feel comfortable and soft all the way down to your toes as finally your whole body is so relaxed, so comfortable. Just enjoy that feeling of being totally relaxed. Relaxed and comfortable and totally at ease.

Now your whole body is relaxed, all your muscles are soft and comfortable, and you are feeling so peaceful... as relaxed as you can be and so comfortable, so calm.

**Optional:** Now begin to imagine you are in a place... somewhere that you really like. A relaxing place in nature, maybe. It can be a real place that you have been to... or it might be somewhere imaginary, or even fantastical. Wherever it is, this is a place where you feel relaxed and secure and a place that is your place and you have complete control of how it looks and how it behaves - it is a safe and comfortable place that you can bring this place to life in your mind's eye. Look around you and think about what you can see. What is the space like? What is the light like? Look at the colours around you and see and feel the textures. Think about how the place feels and how it feels for you to be there. Are you standing or sitting, or even floating in this place? Engage all your senses ... perhaps you can hear things – or perhaps you can even smell or taste something in this place Spend a moment just being here and enjoying that feeling of comfort and complete relaxation... notice how calm you feel and how relaxed your body now is.

**Use if you are doing this during the day rather than as an aid to sleep:** Now it's time to bring your awareness back to this room, feeling wonderfully calm and relaxed. I'll just count to five to give you time to reorient yourself and bring your attention back to the here and now. One... noticing again the room around you... Two... maybe you can hear the everyday noises around you again ... Three... noticing the space around you, the sense of your arms and legs... Four... feeling alert and present in the room and ready to open your eyes... Five. Open your eyes.

Feel free to stretch and take a minute to readjust.