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# Exercises to support your mental health

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## Introduction

Maintaining mental health can feel overwhelming without clear guidance. The following exercises offer practical ways to build a strong and supportive mental health routine.

[Watch an introductory video](#)

## Breathing & Stillness Exercises

### Breathing stillness (20-60 seconds)

Sit up straight with your feet flat on the ground and hands resting on your stomach. Close your eyes and breathe in deeply through your nose, concentrating on the feeling of the air moving through your nostrils. Take two or three slow, deep breaths, focusing as you inhale and exhale, which can help pause mental chatter. Repeat this exercise once every hour during the day.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Box Breathing (2-5 minutes)

There are many types of breathing techniques to help create a sense of calm and support mental well-being. The one we are going to review today is easy to learn and is used widely. It is called box breathing. You can use this approach while sitting comfortably during the day, or while lying in bed to help you fall asleep. The box signifies that each stage of breathing is equal in time. That is, we breathe in for four seconds, then hold for four seconds with our lungs full, then exhale for four seconds, then hold with our lungs empty for four seconds.

See if you can repeat this breathing pattern for about 10 breaths in a row. Do it longer if you really enjoy it. Take your time and be gentle with your breathing. If you find the four-second interval to be too difficult, try box breathing with three seconds instead. Try taking time to box breathe during the day or in bed at nighttime to help you fall asleep.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Coordinated breathing and walking (1-3 minutes)

This practice can be done anywhere, even when walking short distances in parking lots and office hallways. Coordinate each breath with your steps. Inhale as you take three steps, exhale while taking four steps, repeating for as long as it feels comfortable. (Ideally, take one more step on the exhale.) Try to make the breathing smooth while matching it with your steps. This type of

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walking meditation can be done for any time interval and helps reduce the mental chatter in our minds.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

## Mindfulness & Meditation Practices

### Mindfulness meditation (5-20 minutes)

This practice helps you become aware of what you sense and feel in the moment, while purposely avoiding judging or interpreting these sensations. Sit comfortably with your eyes closed and focus on your breathing. Notice your belly and chest as the air moves in and out of your lungs, or in and out of your nostrils. Gently push your belly out when you inhale, letting it contract on its own during exhale.

Mindfulness can be applied when engaging in various hobbies and activities (e.g. knitting, woodworking, bread making). Spend some time focusing on the physical aspects of that hobby. Notice how the dough feels on your fingers, observe the details of the texture of the fabric, etc.

During mindfulness practice, your mind will wander, but this is normal. When this happens, gently and kindly bring yourself back to your original focus.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Guided meditation (10-20 minutes)

In this type of meditation, experts provide the focal point and gentle instruction. There are many types of guided meditations online, including ones that are free of charge. (Ask around and get a personal recommendation!) You can find guided meditations on YouTube. Find two or three that you enjoy and give yourself time to feel the calming effects. Meditation takes practice, so be kind and patient with yourself.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Chanting (Kirtan Kriya) (6-12 minutes)

This exercise combines sounds with finger movements which can help induce relaxation of the brain. Sit up straight in a comfortable position. Breathe in gently, and on the exhale say *Ta, Sa, Na, Ma*. Time the sound with finger motions: *Ta* – touch your thumb and index finger together lightly; *Sa* – thumb and middle finger; *Na* – thumb and ring finger; *Ma* – thumb and pinky. Repeat with a gentle voice. Try to visualize an energizing light – like the warm rays of the sun – gently enveloping you. Do your best! If you are not comfortable with visualization, simply focus on the sounds and finger motions.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

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## Movement-Based Practices

### Movement for Wellness (2-3 minutes)

The term yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word Yuj, meaning 'to yoke', as in yoking a pair of animals together. The goal here is to 'yoke' our mind, so to speak, to find better control over our chattering minds, or that hamster wheel of ours that is constantly in motion. Essentially, yoga is about calming the mind to support mental well-being. You don't need to be super fit or flexible to benefit from this kind of movement. This simple sequence – called sun salutation – can help calm that chatter. In a standing position, arms at your side, gently reach out with your hands, first out towards the side, then continuing up above your head, stretching gently. Bring your hands together above your head. This part of the sequence should occur while inhaling. On the exhale, gently bring your hands down, following the midline of your body until they reach your chest. Keep your hands together in a prayer position. While inhaling, gently sweep your hands down and to the side, repeating the same movements: hands out, moving upwards, ending together above your head. Exhale again, slowly bringing your hands down to your chest. Be intentional about the movement and breath. Inhale in positivity and exhale tension/negativity. Doing this sequence 10 times should take about two minutes. Notice how you feel after.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Coordinated breathing and walking (1-3 minutes)

This practice can be done anywhere, even when walking short distances in parking lots and office hallways. Coordinate each breath with your steps. Inhale as you take three steps, exhale while taking four steps, repeating for as long as it feels comfortable. (Ideally, take one more step on the exhale.) Try to make the breathing smooth while matching it with your steps. This type of walking meditation can be done for any time interval to reduce the mental chatter in our minds.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Nature exposure (10-90 minutes)

Go for a stroll in a forest, park, field, or any place with plant and/or animal life. Spending time around a few trees, a small garden, and even indoor plants can be beneficial too. Use your senses. As you walk, look up at the trees and watch the leaves rustling in the wind. Listen to the birds singing. Observe the squirrels moving from tree to tree. Notice the amazing detail and variations in your houseplants. Try and connect with the natural world around you. Each tree has trillions of cells, and each cell has trillions of atoms interacting in infinitely complex ways. Open yourself to the wonder of nature. Can you elicit a sense of awe?

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## Writing & Reflective Exercises

### Journaling (5-10 minutes)

Find a comfortable and quiet spot to sit and spend five minutes writing down whatever is on your mind. Write your thoughts without judgment. Don't worry about style or grammar, just let the words flow freely from your mind. Consider wrapping up the writing session by highlighting positive attributes you appreciate about yourself and others.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

### Gratitude exercise (2-5 minutes)

Find a comfortable and quiet spot to sit and write down three things you appreciate about your life and for which you are grateful. When you're done, re-read them, slowly pausing between each one to truly feel gratitude and elicit a sense of appreciation. This can be done at any time of day that works for you.

### Positive psychology exercise (5-20 minutes)

This writing exercise involves deliberately contemplating positive aspects of yourself and writing them down. Focus on your positive attributes, you are a wonderful and unique expression of life! These phrases might help you get started: "I was really happy when..." / "Something that my friends like about me is..." / "I am very proud of..." / "My family was very happy with me when I..." / "At work (or in school), I am very good at..." / "Something that makes me really unique is..."

### Thinking through vs. thinking about (5-10 minutes)

This technique helps 'think through' what is on your mind, rather than thinking about it. Sit comfortably and write down a problem or challenge that's on your mind and take some time to think *through* it. How can you approach this challenge? What are the possible solutions, the benefits, and negatives of each possible solution? How can you execute the solution and what are the near-term action items? Jot down the answers. Remember, don't just think about your challenges, really think *through* them.

## Cognitive & Thought Reframing (CBT-Based)

### Behavioral Activation (CBT)

Behavioural activation is a great strategy both for improving mood and maintaining well-being. So, what is behavioural activation? It's about ensuring that you stay active in your day-to-day in a way that supports your mental well-being. Here are two things to keep in mind when thinking about doing behavioural activation:

# Exercises to support your mental health

Find a balance between activities that bring joy and that give you a sense of accomplishment.

Action precedes motivation. You might be saying to yourself – this all sounds good, but I don't have any energy for this right now. I'll give this a try when I feel motivated again.

The trick though, is that motivation does not always precede action. In fact, on the contrary, action most often needs to come before motivation. We need to first get going, to start feeling motivated again. Once we get that ball rolling, it becomes easier to activate. So, start with something small, something that feels manageable. It can be as simple as taking a walk around the block or taking five minutes to begin tidying your room. The key is to get started.

First, what is one activity that you can commit to doing today that once gave you enjoyment, or you think could be enjoyable? It can be as simple taking a minute to sit in the sun by your window, sipping a tea with intention, OR as ambitious as planning a trip, learning a new instrument, or playing a sport you once enjoyed.

Next, what is one activity that gives you a sense of accomplishment – even a small one – that you can commit to doing today? It can be as simple as making a to-do list, making your bed, or responding to an e-mail, or something bigger like getting started on your taxes, vacuuming your house, or signing up for a course.

Find something that's a good fit for you, feels challenging, but is also attainable. Schedule it into your day and commit to it! Notice how you feel before, and after. Pay attention to any small shift in how you feel. When you first get started, you may not notice any positive feelings – that's ok! Positive shifts will come with time and consistent practice.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

## Catching the 'Thinking Traps' (CBT) (5-10 minutes)

In cognitive psychology, there is a phrase that helps us understand and shape our thoughts: “catch it, check it and change it.” Dr. Aaron Beck, a psychologist and the founder of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, asserts that our thoughts influence our mood, our physical state and our behaviour, and that they are all interconnected based on the assumptions and appraisals that we make about our beliefs, about our self, our situation, and the world around us.

The premise is that our minds create short cuts based on our life experiences and sometimes we engage in thinking patterns that don't serve us well or may not be based on actual facts. Let's call them, thinking traps. Some common thinking traps include: jumping to conclusions, relying on feelings as facts, personalizing situations, mind reading (a belief that we know what others are thinking about us), negatively labelling ourselves, and selectively paying attention to the negative aspects of a situation rather than looking at the whole picture. These are just a few, but there are many more.

# Exercises to support your mental health

First, “catch the thoughts.” Start by paying attention to the situation around you, the thoughts that emerge, any unpleasant emotions, behavioural response, and any physical sensations you might be having. For example, are your shoulders hiked up to your chin? Are you sweating, or clenching your jaw? Write down the situation, physical sensations, behavioural response, the thoughts and the emotions.

Once you have written down your experiences, it’s time to “check in” on your thoughts. What is the story you are telling yourself? Are there assumptions being made? Is there evidence this may not actually be true? Ask yourself, what would I tell a loved one or friend who was experiencing this? If you are having thoughts that are unhelpful, unrealistic or that you wouldn’t say to someone else, this is where you’d “change it.” Remember, “catch it, check it, change it.” Think about what could be more helpful or realistic to tell yourself in this situation. Is there another way to look at it?

The way you see yourself can affect your thoughts and feelings, and changing the way you think can improve your mental well-being. We generate many thoughts and assumptions every day and it is very powerful to be able to stop, catch them, check them, and if needed, change them. Repeating this exercise can help increase insight into your experience and give you the power to change negative thoughts, thus influencing and improving your mood, physical sensations, and behavioural responses.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

## Compassion & Emotional Processing

### Self-Compassion Exercise (5-10 minutes)

Self-compassion is a process that depends on honest, direct contact with the felt experience of our life challenges and difficulties. It is about nurturing an attitude of kindness and understanding towards ourselves and our challenges, rather than being critical and judgemental. Self-compassion can be difficult to practice when we feel overwhelmed by feelings of anger, fear or unworthiness. To foster self-compassion in the presence of negative emotions, try this simple exercise called “RAIN”, developed by Dr. Tara Brach. RAIN stands for:

- **R**ecognize what is going on;
- **A**llow the experience to be there, just as it is;
- **I**nvestigate with interest and care;
- **N**urture with self-compassion.

Begin by sitting in a comfortable position. Take several slow, deep, relaxing breaths and focus your attention on your breathing.

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Now shift your attention to recognize the difficult feeling you are experiencing in this moment. Make sure to shift your thoughts away from the narrative of the experience and focus on how it feels. Where do you feel it and what does it feel like? What sensations are you aware of?

Next take a moment to simply allow this experience to be. Notice how you react to this difficult feeling. What are your thoughts doing? Send a message to yourself to allow the feeling to just be as it is, without judgement, uncomfortable as it may be. Spend a minute or two just allowing the feeling to be.

Next take a moment to investigate this experience. Be curious but not critical, take a moment to explore this experience with interest and care. Be gentle. Ask yourself, what is really going on here? Is there perhaps an unmet need that is arising? Is there something within you that is asking for attention? What emotions are arising? What are my feelings about what is happening? Are these feelings familiar?

Finally, take a few moments to nurture. That is, to provide kindness and understanding to yourself, just as we would with a child in need. You might take a hand and place it over your heart and offer yourself warmth and comfort. You might offer yourself acceptance that you are struggling and tell yourself that it is OK, this is part of the human experience that we all share. Perhaps visualize yourself enveloped in a light of loving kindness.

Practicing self-compassion is a valuable way to practice mental hygiene.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)

## Pro-social prayer (2-5 minutes)

This exercise focuses on cultivating kindness and compassion toward yourself and others. It is not tied to any specific belief system and can be practiced in a way that feels meaningful to you. Focus your thoughts on well wishes for others. For example: "I pray with sincerity and earnestness for the well-being of others including loved ones, friends, and those I may not have a positive connection with or might find challenging. I pray for courage and compassion to be of service to the greater good. I pray in thanks for the many blessings that have been bestowed upon me." Consider your own variations.

[Watch a demonstration video.](#)