

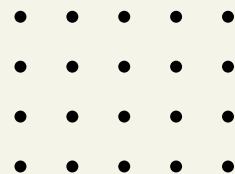
LIFEHACK

Expand your toolbox of life skills and strengthen your mental wellbeing



Optional Module


Stress less & relax more





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How to Use this Workbook

LifeHack is a self-help programme in which you learn various life skills for all sorts of situations you might encounter in life. This program is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and consists of reading material and interactive exercises. Four domains are covered: your emotional well-being, your studies, your social life and your self-esteem.

Each domain consists of one main module and two related optional modules. The best way to do the programme is to complete one domain per week by doing the main module and any of the optional modules that seem relevant to you. Therefore, the whole programme will take approximately 4 to 6 weeks.

You can find a list of resources in the community [here](#) when you need support. Counselling and Psychological services are available at HKU for current students. It is free-of-charge, professional and confidential. Don't hesitate to seek help if needed.

Enquiries and Feedback
CEDARS – Counselling and Person Enrichment Section (CoPE)
Tel: 3917-8388 | Email: cedars-cope@hku.hk



Stress less & relax more

Introduction

If there's one thing people are generally really good at, it's stressing out about all sorts of things, big and small. But don't despair! You can definitely get better at becoming stress-resistant.

So after today, you will...

- Have a better understanding of what stress is and how it impacts your body, mind and behaviour.
- Become more aware of your stress levels and symptoms.
- Learn about 2 types of strategy to cope with the stress: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.
- Gain 3 different hacks to help you relax more.

Lavender Reduces Stress



Before we get into it: describe your personal goal(s) with regards to stress and relaxation.

What would you like to achieve after doing this module?

Let's go!

What is stress?

Deadlines, exams or presentations, going through difficult times... You may frequently find yourself facing these situations and feeling tense or overwhelmed. You might say: "I'm so stressed out!". But what is stress really?

How do you describe stress?

Different symptoms and effects of stress

There is no right or wrong answer: everybody experiences stress differently. In scientific terms, **stress is the physiological and psychological response to a demanding situation or adverse life event.** When we encounter a stressful situation, it can have an effect on our bodies and our mental and emotional wellbeing.



Here's a list of all the different symptoms and effects of stress. Check the ones that apply to you when you're stressed:

Physical symptoms	Cognitive symptoms	Emotional consequences
<input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension	<input type="checkbox"/> Increased negative self-talk	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling anxious
<input type="checkbox"/> Headache	<input type="checkbox"/> Rumination	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling insecure
<input type="checkbox"/> Shortness of breath	<input type="checkbox"/> Being preoccupied with the things that stress you out	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling isolated or lonely
<input type="checkbox"/> Heart palpitations	<input type="checkbox"/> Thinking of the worst possible outcome	<input type="checkbox"/> Having difficulty relaxing
<input type="checkbox"/> Dry mouth	<input type="checkbox"/> Having racing thoughts	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling on edge
<input type="checkbox"/> Nausea	<input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling depressed or moody
<input type="checkbox"/> Trembling	<input type="checkbox"/> Concentration problems	<input type="checkbox"/> Feeling overwhelmed
<input type="checkbox"/> Sweating	<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisiveness	<input type="checkbox"/> Worrying
<input type="checkbox"/> Low energy	<input type="checkbox"/> Being easily distracted	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Frequent colds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/> Teeth grinding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

The purpose of stress

Everyone feels stressed or nervous from time to time. Feeling stressed can be beneficial because it encourages you to take action. Imagine not having any stress before an exam at all. What would happen? You would probably not study very hard and would find it difficult to motivate yourself or to focus on studying.

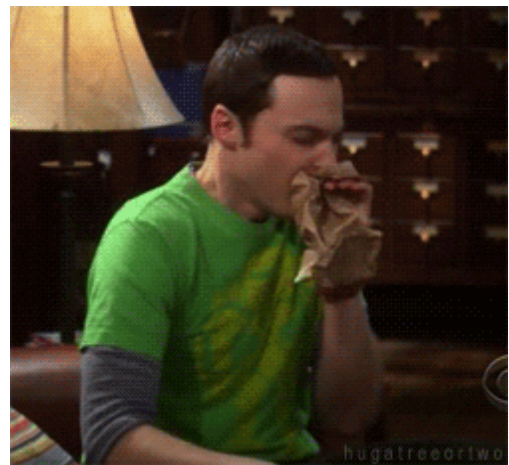
So short periods of stress make us more efficient and productive. Viewing your stress in a more positive light can sometimes already help reduce it!

Think about your daily life. In which situations is stress useful to you and why? What would happen if you never felt any kind of stress?

Unhealthy stress

When the stress is ongoing and intense, it takes a toll on you and can have a negative influence on your overall health. That's the kind of stress we aim to reduce in this module through these 3 steps:

1. Becoming aware of stress
2. Actively implementing coping strategies
3. Introducing more relaxation activities



1. Becoming aware of stress

In order to deal with stress, you first need to become aware of when you're stressed. There are tons of ways it can manifest, which you looked at in the previous chapter already.

Then, using this knowledge, you can determine your stress levels in different situations/moments. To do this, take a few seconds to 'scan' your body (do you notice any of the physical symptoms?) and inspect your mind (what kinds of thoughts and feelings do you have?).

On a scale of 0 to 10, how stressed are you feeling right now?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Not stressed at all

Extremely stressed

Why did you give yourself this rating? Write in terms of physical, cognitive and emotional symptoms (use the cheat-sheets below!).

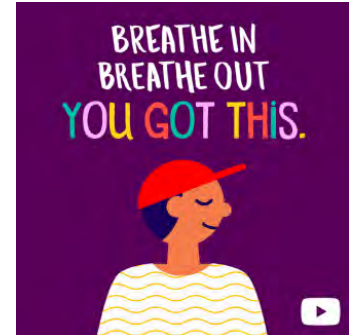
Physical symptoms	Cognitive symptoms	Emotional symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muscle tension• Headache• Shortness of breath• Heart palpitations• Dry mouth• Nausea• Trembling• Sweating• Low energy• Frequent colds• Teeth grinding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased negative self-talk• Rumination• Being preoccupied with the things that stress you out• Thinking of the worst possible outcome• Having racing thoughts• Forgetfulness• Concentration problems• Being easily distracted• Indecisiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling anxious• Feeling insecure• Feeling isolated or lonely• Having difficulty relaxing• Feeling on edge• Feeling depressed or moody• Feeling overwhelmed• Worrying

Track the stress

Keep track of your stress levels for a week. Focus on how you feel in body and mind (check out the symptoms again for a little extra help!), write down your ratings (1 to 10) in different situations and analyse when you feel stressed or relaxed. Stress is sneaky: it can go unnoticed until you actively pay attention. So try it, you might be surprised at what you find!

2. Using coping strategies

The next step is to actively implement coping strategies. During stressful times, we use many strategies to minimize the negative effect of stress. We can try to ignore the situation, do a breathing exercise, try to solve the problem by taking action, to complain to other people, to eat certain foods, practice our hobbies...



The things we do to reduce (the effects of) our stress are called "coping strategies." Sometimes these strategies work perfectly, but sometimes they do nothing or make the situation even worse...

What do you generally do to reduce your stress?

Do you think this approach is helpful? Why or why not (try taking into account both short-term and long-term effects of your approach)?

Coping strategies

Watch the below video now! (The video transcript is available on p.17)



Some examples

Check out this example of how people use different coping skills for the same stressful event of having to give a presentation in front of a large group, even though they both dislike public speaking.

Aki uses problem-focused coping	Lipika uses emotion-focused coping
He watches YouTube videos on charismatic speakers, he asks his friends for tips on public speaking. He also practices by doing the presentation for his roommate and getting feedback.	She motivates herself by saying: "I can do this!", she reminds herself that she's done several presentations in the past and they went quite well, thinking of the positive feedback she's gotten. Before the presentation, she does a short relaxation exercise to calm herself.

Some people use both types of coping equally, and some people have a stronger preference for one over the other.

Which type of coping strategy do you use most: problem- or emotion-focused?



Choosing a coping strategy

We tend to use the strategies that are easily available to us: the ones we learned once and have been using ever since (even if it isn't the most effective approach!). To better deal with stress, it's important to purposefully select our coping strategy, rather than mindlessly using our 'default' approach.

When it comes to an effective coping strategy, there is no one absolute best technique. The most effective coping strategy depends on the situation and the person, but you can use the following rule of thumb to help select a strategy:

Ask yourself: **how much can I influence or control the stressful situation?** If you can change something about the stressful situation itself, it might be better to use problem-focused coping. If you can't really influence the situation, it's often better to use emotion-focused coping.

Let's put this into practice! Describe a stressful situation from your past you can remember quite well:

What did you do to cope with it when it originally happened? Was this problem- or emotion-focused coping?

Did this approach follow the rule of thumb above? What might have been a better strategy for this specific situation and why?

Inspiration: different ways to cope with stress

Examples of **problem-focused coping**:

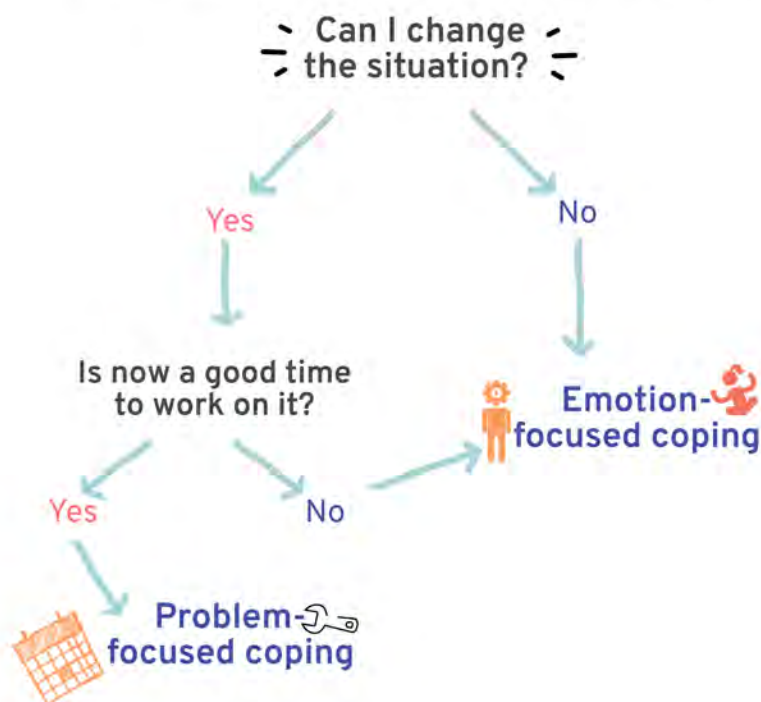
- Looking for ways to solve the problem
- Creating an action plan
- Time-management: creating a planning, making a checklist, etc.
- Asking for / finding help to improve the situation.

Examples of **emotion-focused coping**:

- Meditation
- Praying
- Getting a massage
- Walking
- Listening to music
- Thinking positive thoughts
- Reminiscing on positive memories
- Finding some humor in the situation
- Journaling

Next time you're feeling stressed, take a minute to analyse the situation and see which kind of coping strategy would be best suited.

Choosing the coping strategy:
Problem-focused vs emotion-focused coping



3. Relaxing more

We're ending this module on a positive note: by doing more relaxing and enjoyable activities! When people are stressed, they often struggle to relax or feel they don't have time for it. But as you can probably guess, that's exactly when it's most important!

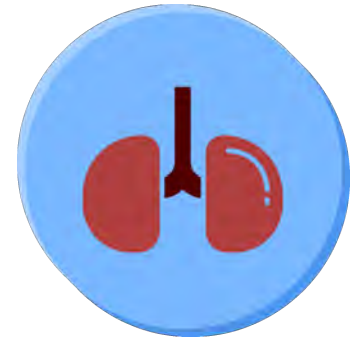
How good would you say you are at relaxing during stressful times?

It's not always easy to relax, but the good news is that this is a skill that you can train and get better at. There are many different relaxation techniques and there is no one technique that is the best. The most important thing is that you find something relaxing, and that you're able to incorporate it into your daily life. Today, you will learn three different relaxation hacks.



Hack #1: Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises are often very easy to do, don't take up a lot of time and are very effective at reducing stress during peak times. We cannot live without breathing, so we might as well do it right - right? The exercise below is only two minutes and can be done any time, any place. Give it a try now!



- Get comfortable. You can sit, lie down, or even stand up.
- Relax your shoulders, noticing how they drop down slightly, and place one hand on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose for 3 to 4 seconds. Try to do this calmly but naturally: don't force yourself to breathe in extremely slowly or deeply.
- As you're inhaling, focus on the feeling of your stomach expanding under your hand.
- Now press gently on your stomach and exhale through your mouth for 3 to 4 seconds.
- Keep inhaling and exhaling like this for about 2 minutes, focusing your attention on your stomach. You'll notice your breath slows down automatically and becomes deeper!

What did you notice while and after doing this exercise?

NEXT LEVEL HACK

There are a million and one breathing exercises out there, and you will like some more than others. Youtube and Google are your friends: give them a search for 'breathing exercises' and see what appeals to you!

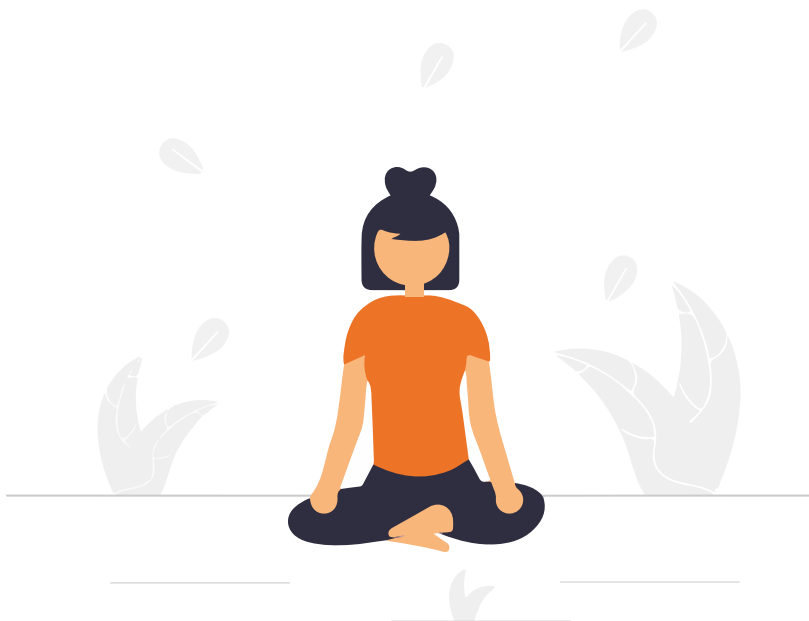
Hack #2: Mindfulness

When you read mindfulness, you might instantly picture a bunch of people meditating with their eyes closed. But mindfulness does not necessarily mean meditating. Anything you do with your full attention can be called mindful. Research shows that our brains like focusing on one thing and find this relaxing, which is why mindfulness is so effective. Below are two simple mindfulness exercises you should give a go.



Mindful showering

While showering, focus your attention on all the sensations: what you feel, hear, see, smell and even taste. Feel the water splash on your body and notice the temperature of the water. Listen to the sound of the water hitting the walls or floor, and notice the scent of your shower gel or shampoo. See the drops slide down the wall, and how the water goes down the drain. Notice the sensation of scrubbing your skin or lathering your hair. There are endless things to notice while showering! If you find that your attention has wandered off, refocus on the sensations of showering.

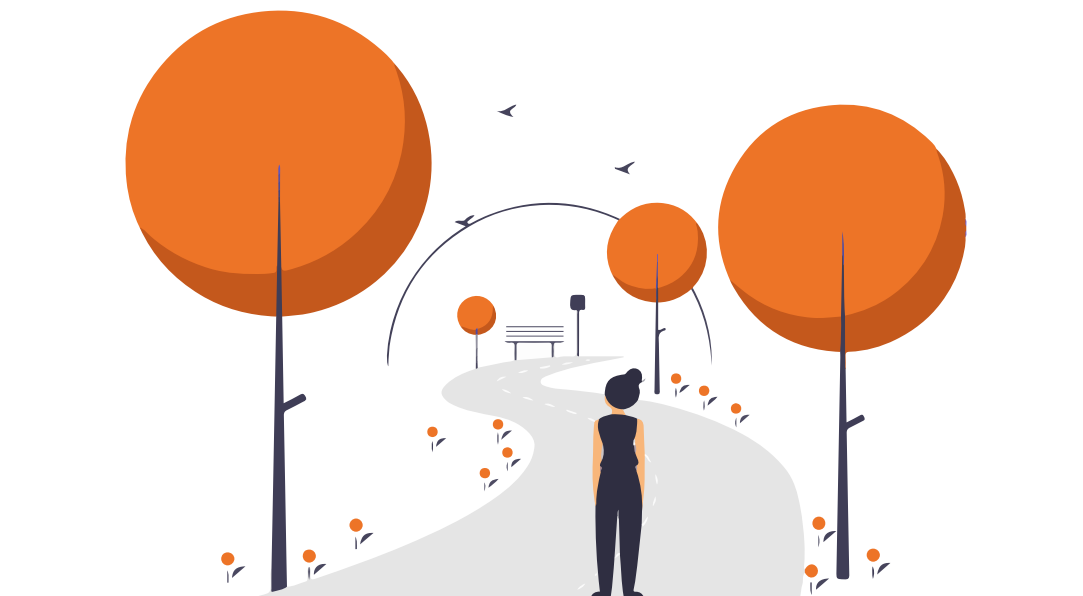


Mindful nature focus

Find a place in nature (such as a park or garden). You can walk around, or just sit quietly. Pay attention to all the things you can observe in this natural environment. Observe your environment, listen to the sounds, take a deep breath and see what you smell, feel the temperature and the wind on your skin. Try to hold this focus for a while (at least 10-15 minutes). And again, when you find that your attention has wandered off, refocus on all the things you can perceive around you.

Give mindfulness a try! Which of the 2 options above appeals most to you?

When exactly will you do the mindfulness exercise? (also put it in your calendar)



Hack #3: Do (more of) what you already enjoy

Last but most certainly not least: do more of what you already enjoy or find relaxing. Relaxation isn't limited to 'fancy' techniques or exercises: it can be anything that works for you. Some people clear their minds by going jogging, making music, reading a book, or other activities.



It's good to make time for these things and (if necessary) to even plan them in when you notice yourself getting overwhelmed. Most people tend to 'drop' the fun stuff when they get busy because they're not considered a priority, but this is pretty much the worst thing you can do. Especially at stressful times, relaxation is crucial to your wellbeing.

What kinds of activities do you already do that you find relaxing?

Analyse stressful times from your past: did you spend enough time doing these activities when your stress was high?

How could you do more of these activities during stressful times? How will you remind yourself and make sure you take the time to do them, rather than drop them?

Hack wrap-up



Look at you go, you made it to the end!

Now let's take a look back at what you said at the beginning of this module.

Go back to p.2 to recap what you wanted to achieve with regards to stress and relaxation.

How will you move forward with this goal, using the tips from this module?

This module in bullets:

- You now have a better understanding of what stress is and how it impacts your mind, body and behaviour.
- The first step to beating stress is to become aware of your stress levels and symptoms. 'Scan' your body and mind frequently to give yourself a stress level rating. Stress often goes unnoticed and by practicing this scan you'll become much more aware.
- Next, implement a strategy to cope with the stress: problem-focused coping (if you can change the situation itself) and emotion-focused coping (if you have no or limited control over the situation).
- Lastly, make a purposeful effort to relax more. Consistently do breathing exercises, mindfulness or any other activity you already find relaxing!



Hey, psst! Does the optional module 'Healthify' your lifestyle' sound useful as well? Then head over there as soon as you complete this module, since you're **on a roll** now anyway ;)

What did you think of this module? Please let us know your views [here](#).

Supplementary information

Video transcript of coping strategies

There are two kinds of coping strategies.

The first is problem-focused coping. This coping strategy targets the cause of stress by directly changing the stressful situation. It includes actively trying to solve the problems related to stress with action-oriented behaviors. Examples of this strategy are planning for problem-solving, setting clear and achievable goals, and coming up with a plan to change the stressful situation. To a certain extent, stress management is about problem-solving and changing stressful circumstances.

The second kind of coping strategy is emotion-focused coping. Because sometimes, though we try our best to change a situation, it simply cannot be solved. Then it is more effective to use emotion-focused coping strategies. These are about changing your thoughts and emotions instead of the situation. Examples of this strategy are changing the way of thinking about a stressful situation, altering your expectations, finding humor in it, accepting your emotions or the situation, using relaxation techniques or simply expressing your emotions even if you know it does not change the situation.