



Managing Emotions & Reducing Distress



Contents	Page
1. Quick Tips for Reducing Emotional Distress	2
2. Exercise: Paired Muscle Relaxation and Breathing	3
3. Exercise: Effective Rethinking Paired with Relaxation	4
4. Reducing Emotional Distress Through Distraction	5
5. Self-Soothing with the Five Senses	7
6. Tips for Improving the Present Moment	8
7. Exercise: Present Moment Sensory Body Awareness	10
8. Radical Acceptance for Emotional Wellbeing	11
9. Practicing Radical Acceptance	12
10. Focused Attention or Turning the Mind	13
11. The Concept of Willingness	14
12. Accepting Reality with the Help of Your Body	15



1. Quick Tips for Reducing Distress



Stop – Stop! Wait! Imagine you are at the side of a busy road, wait until it is clear before trying to cross. Do not react or move a muscle! Breathe slowly and calmly with attention, and let your emotions align with your breathing so they slowly calm. Resist the temptation to react on the emotional intensity without thinking.



Take a step back – Take a step back from the situation. Take a break. Let go. Take a deep breath. Do not let your feelings make you act impulsively.



Observe – Notice what is going on inside and outside you. What is the situation? What are your thoughts and feelings? What are others saying or doing?



Proceed mindfully – Act with awareness. In deciding what to do, consider your thoughts and feelings, the situation, and think about your goals. Ask your Wise Mind: Which actions will make it better and make it more likely I will get what I need, and which actions may make things worse and take me further away from my goals?



For and Against – Use for and against any time you have to decide between two courses of action. If an urge is emotionally very strong, then it may be difficult *not* acting impulsively on it which can make things worse in the long term. So, if you feel a strong urge, stop and reflect. Make a list For and Against acting on the urge. Use the grid below to evaluate the For (Pros) and Against (Cons):

For (Pros)	Against (Cons)
For acting on strong impulsive urges, E.g. I may make more problems for myself in the future, I will get some immediate relief.	Against acting on strong impulsive urges, E.g. I will reach my goals more quickly, I won't make things more difficult for myself.



Temperature Reduction – Splash cold water on your face for 30 seconds or hold a cold cloth on your closed eyes and cheeks for 30 seconds. (Keep water/temperature above 50°F so it is not too cold). This triggers your “dive response” where your heart rate slows down and blood flow is redirected to the brain and heart, which will reduce the level and intensity of emotional distress.



Intense Exercise – Engage in a brief bout of intense exercise, to metabolise (use up) the stress/distress hormones in your body. E.g. running up and down the stairs a few times, jumping on the spot until out of breath, going out for a brisk walk or run etc. Expending energy in these ways starts to metabolise the adrenalin and cortisol involved in intense emotion and, thus, will reduce the level and intensity of distress.



Conscious Breathing – For a few minutes, slow the pace of your breathing. Make your in breaths slightly deeper so you can feel your ribcage expand and make your out breaths longer. Follow the air as you inhale and exhale and notice all the sensations in your body as you do so. This deliberate, conscious breathing helps activate the parasympathetic nervous system which brings feelings of calm, contentment, and relaxation by, again, metabolising the chemicals in the body associated with distress.



2. Exercise: Paired Muscle Relaxation and Breathing



Find a quiet place to practice this exercise with no or minimal distractions. Make sure you have enough time, about 10 minutes or longer if you prefer. Remember that effectiveness improves with practice. If judgments and other negative thoughts or difficult feelings arise while you are doing your paired muscle relaxation and breathing exercise, observe them, don't try to get rid of them, just gently return your attention to your breathing and the sensations in your body.



a) Get into a comfortable position and loosen any tight clothing. Lie or sit down, with all body parts uncrossed and no body part supporting any others.



b) For each area of the body listed below, create tension by tightening the muscles, stay within your own comfort limits. Focus on the sensation of tightness in that area of your body. Hold the tension as you inhale for a few seconds, then release the tightened muscles as you slowly breathe out.



c) As you release and breathe out, say in your mind slowly "Relax" or "Letting go".



d) Notice the changed sensations in your body for 10–15 seconds, then repeat on that body part or just move on to the next set of muscles if you have limited time for your practice.

1. **Feet and Ankles:** stick heels forward with toes scrunched under.
2. **Calves:** point toes down with legs outstretched.
3. **Upper legs and buttocks:** tense thighs and squeeze buttocks together.
4. **Stomach:** hold stomach in tightly.
5. **Chest:** take deep breath in to expand your ribcage fully and hold it.
6. **Back:** arch your back, bringing shoulder blades together.
7. **Hands and wrists:** make fists with both hands and flex wrists backwards.
8. **Lower and upper arms:** make fists and bend both fists up to touch your shoulders.
9. **Shoulders and Neck:** pull shoulders up to your ears and push your chin down towards your chest.
10. **Face:** Scrunch up your nose and bring cheeks, lips and forehead towards the centre of your face with your eyes tightly shut.

This exercise will significantly improve your ability to relax if practiced regularly. If you are short for time, you can just choose one or two areas to tense and relax, following the above instructions.



3. Exercise: Effective Rethinking Paired with Relaxation



Step 1. Write down the triggering event(s) and/or thought(s) that are causing distress and that you want to reduce your emotional arousal to.

Step 2. Ask: "What am I telling myself, how am I interpreting the situation that causes such distress and arousal in me?" Write down the answers, e.g. "They hate me," "I can't stand this!" "I can't do this," "This is the worst thing in the world." "I am going to die." Etc.



Step 3. Re-think the situation and its meaning in a way that counteracts the thoughts and interpretations that produce the distressing emotions. See the situation differently and in a more helpful way and write down as many helpful/effective thoughts as you can to replace the unhelpful/stressful thoughts.



Step 4. When you are not in the stressful triggering event/situation, practice imagining the stressful event and:



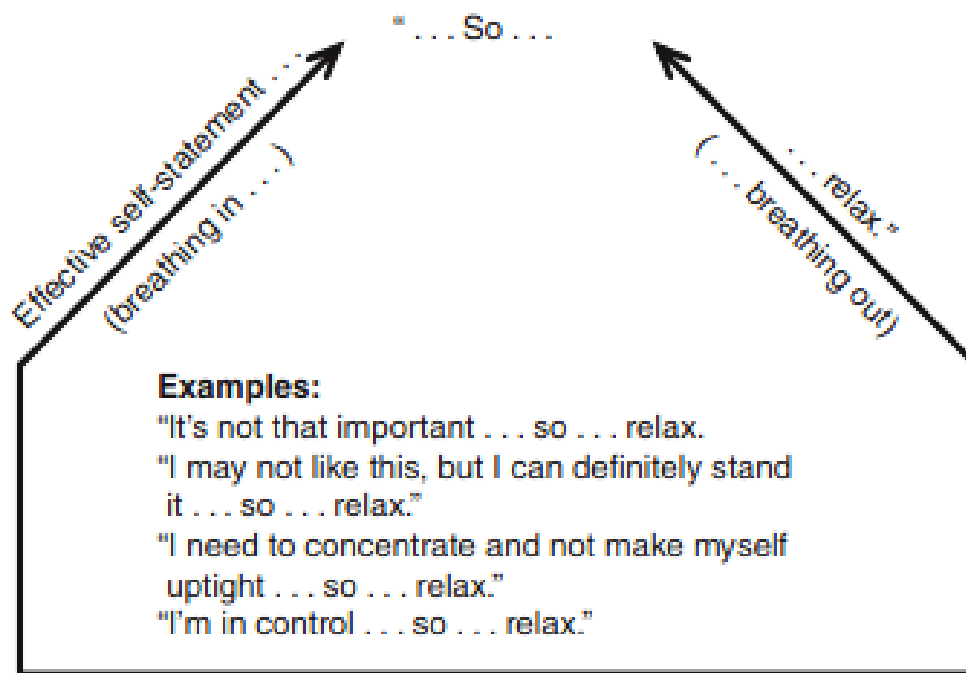
a. While breathing in, say to yourself an effective self-statement, e.g. "I can cope with this." "I like me and that's all I need" "I know I am good enough." "It's not that important." "I'm going to be fine." etc.



b. Then, while slowly breathing out, say the word "Relax" to yourself gently and softly and start to notice all the tension leave your body. You can also try tensing your muscles first then saying relax as you breathe out to heighten the effect, see Paired Muscle Relaxation Exercise above.



Step 5. Keep practicing every chance you get until you have mastered the strategy.





4. Reducing Emotional Distress Through Distraction



Activities

- Do a task you need to get done.
- Find an event to go to.
- Surf the Internet.
- Go out for a meal.
- Listen to music.
- Play cards or games.
- Watch TV, a Film etc.
- Play computer games.
- Write e-mails.
- Eat a favourite food.
- Build or make something.
- Read magazines, books, comics.
- Clean a room in your house.
- Go walking, exercise.
- Play sports.
- Call or go out with a friend.
- Play with your children.
- Do crossword puzzles or Sudoku.



Contributing

- Find volunteer work to do.
- Give away things you don't need.
- Do something thoughtful.
- Help a friend or family member.
- Call or text someone to just say "Hi".
- Do something nice for someone.
- Make something nice for someone.



Comparisons

- Think about people who cope less well than you.
- Compare how you are feeling now to a time when you felt worse.
- Watch documentaries about others' troubles.
- Read/watch about how people have overcome adversity.
- Compare yourself to those less fortunate.
- Read inspiring biographies of famous people you admire.



Emotions

- Read emotional books or stories.
- Access different emotions via different genres, e.g. scary/horror, jokes/comedies, feel-good/happy-endings, play music that is soothing/energising/dramatic etc.
- Watch emotional TV shows or films.
- Listen to emotional music.



Pushing Away

- Leave the situation physically for a while.
- Shout "Stop" or "No" if you notice you are ruminating.
- Box up the distress and put it away for a while.
- Leave the situation mentally.
- Build an imaginary wall between yourself and the situation.
- Deny the problem for the moment.
- Put the pain on an imaginary shelf and walk away.



Thoughts

- Count to ten in your own language, then try it in another language.
- Name all the different colours you see in the scene around you.
- Recite a poem or sing the words to a song in your mind.
- Name one thing you can see, one thing you can hear, one thing you can taste, one thing you can touch, one thing you can smell in your immediate environment.



Sensations

- Squeeze a rubber ball very hard.
- Listen to very loud music for a short while.
- Hold ice in your hand or mouth.
- Go out in the rain or snow.
- Take a hot or cold shower.
- Tense and relax the muscles in body.
- Splash cold water on your face.



5. Self-Soothing with the Five Senses

Vision

- Look at the stars at night.
- Make a room visually pleasing.
- People-watch.
- Look at nature around you.
- Go to a live dance/drama show.
- Walk in a park or take a scenic hike.
- Look at pictures you like.
- Light a candle and watch the flame.
- Go to an art gallery.
- Walk in a pretty part of town.
- Watch dance/drama shows on TV.
- Browse through online stores.
- Buy one beautiful flower.
- Lay the table using best things.
- Sit in a grand hotel lobby.
- Watch a sunrise or a sunset.
- Notice the details of everything that you see.

Hearing

- Listen to soothing music.
- Listen to sounds of the town.
- Sing your favourite songs.
- Learn to play an instrument.
- Listen to happy music.
- Listen to sounds of the waves.
- Hum a soothing tune.
- Listen to the radio or TV.
- Listen to sounds of rain.
- Listen to sounds of birds singing.
- Make a playlist.
- Stop and listen for sounds.

Smell

- Use your favourite-smelling soap.
- Open a pack of fresh coffee.
- Smell flowers.
- Use your favourite-smelling scent.
- Put lemon oil on your furniture.
- Burn incense.
- Walk in the woods and smell the air.
- Make cookies, bread, or popcorn.
- Light a scented candle.

Taste

- Eat some of favourite food.
- Eat some childhood comfort food.
- Eat slowly and mindfully.
- Drink a favourite soft drink.
- Sample ice cream flavours.
- Treat yourself to something sweet.
- Chew mint-gum or bubble-gum.

Touch

- Use hand cream.
- Give yourself a manicure.
- Put soothing lotion on your body.
- Touch objects to notice the texture.
- Wrap up in a soft blanket.
- Give yourself a pedicure.
- Take a long hot bath or shower.
- Stroke a cat, dog or other pet.
- Have a massage.
- Visit a beauty parlour.
- Wear something soft on your skin.
- Put clean sheets on your bed.



6. Tips for Improving the Present Moment



Imagery

- Remember a happy time and imagine yourself in it again; replay that time in your mind again.
- Visualise everything going well.
- Imagine difficult emotions draining out of you like water down the sink.
- Imagine a safe, secret, and beautiful room within yourself, close the door so nothing can hurt you.
- Make up a calming fantasy place.
- Imagine very relaxing scenes.



Meaning

- Find purpose or meaning in painful situations.
- Find, listen to, read about things that are important to you, your values, what gives your life purpose, that you want to live your life by.
- Experience yourself growing stronger from any difficulties you face.
- Focus on whatever positive aspects of the painful situation you can find, repeat these positive aspects in your mind.



Prayer

- Open your heart to a greater power, supreme being, God, or whatever seems the right wording for you, that represents your higher self.
- Trust that all will be well and then behave accordingly.
- Turn things over to this greater power and ask for strength to bear the pain and make it through the difficulty.
- Trust you will cope with whatever happens.



Relaxing actions

- Take a long, hot shower or bath or sit in a hot tub.
- Massage your hands, neck, and scalp.
- Breathe deeply and mindfully.
- Change your facial expression to a soft smile.
- Practice yoga, tai chi, or other gentle, soothing exercise.
- Drink warm milk or hot chocolate.



One Thing in the Moment

- Focus your entire attention on the physical information coming in from your 5 senses right now.
- Focus all your attention on just what you are doing right now.
- Keep yourself and your mind in the present moment, not thinking about the past or worrying about the future.



Vacation

- Give yourself a brief mental vacation from all responsibilities.
- Get a magazine and read it with chocolates on the sofa.
- Put your feet up for an hour's break from hard work.
- Get in bed and take a short time-out with the covers over your head.
- Go to the beach or the woods or the park with a picnic.
- Turn off your phone for the whole day.



Encouragement and Rethinking the Situation

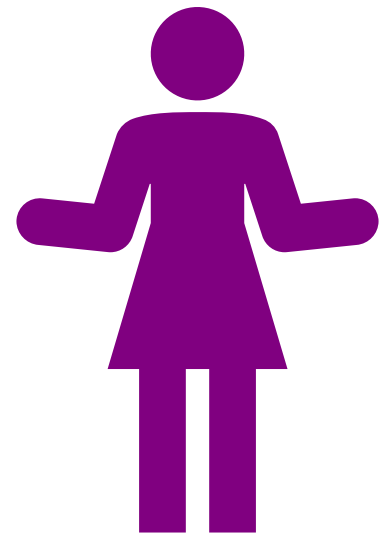
- Be your own cheerleader: "You got this!", "You are doing great!".
- Praise yourself, "I am doing the best I can and that's good enough!".
- Remind yourself you can and will cope with whatever happens.
- Remind yourself everything is going to be okay and "this too shall pass".



7. Exercise: Present Moment Sensory Body Awareness

Find a comfortable position and read the suggestions below and then try to notice and connect with the feelings or sensations being suggested:

1. Notice your scalp and your hair on your head.
2. Notice your stomach rising and falling as you breathe in and breathe out.
3. Notice the space between your eyes at the top of your nose.
4. Notice the distance between each of your ears.
5. Notice the air flow through your nostrils, slightly cooler on the in breath, slightly warmer on the out breath.
6. Notice your arms against your body.
7. Notice the soles of your feet in your shoes or on the floor.
8. Notice the space within your mouth.
9. Notice the position of your tongue in your mouth.
10. Notice the air against your cheeks.
11. Notice any tingling sensations in your hands and feet.
12. Notice the temperature in the air around you.
13. Notice if one of your hands or feet feels warmer than the other.
14. Notice if there is any tightness or tension in your neck or back.
15. Notice any feelings of heaviness in your legs or arms.
16. Notice your face relaxing and feeling soft.





8. Radical Acceptance for Emotional Wellbeing

Radical Acceptance is not against change, it is not approving of the way things are, it is the ability to know when there is nothing that can be done to change a situation and that acceptance is the only way to turn intolerable pain into bearable pain.



What is Radical Acceptance?

- a) Radical means all the way, complete and total.
- b) It is accepting in your mind, your heart, and your body.
- c) It's when you stop fighting reality, stop throwing tantrums because reality is not the way you want it, and let go of trying to make things different than what they are.



What Has to Be Accepted?

- a) Reality is as it is. The facts about the past and the present are the facts, even if you do not like them.
- b) There are limitations on the future for everyone and realistic limitations need to be accepted.
- c) Everything has a cause, including events and situations that cause you pain and suffering.
- d) Life can be worth living even with painful events in it.



Why Accept Reality?

- a) Rejecting reality does not change reality.
- b) Changing reality requires first that you accept reality exactly as it is now.
- c) Pain can't be avoided; it is nature's way of signalling the need for some helpful action. Once pain has turned up in our lives, rejecting it only magnifies the pain.
- d) Rejecting reality turns tolerable pain into intolerable suffering. Refusing to accept reality will keep you stuck in unhappiness, bitterness, anger, sadness, shame, or other painful emotions.
- e) Acceptance may lead to sadness, but if you can allow yourself to be sad without trying to get rid of sadness, then deep calmness usually follows.
- f) The path out of misery is through acceptance that misery is a normal and to-be-expected part of human life. By refusing to accept that some misery is an unavoidable part of life, you will likely permanently feel miserable and distressed in some way or other.













Factors That Interfere with The Ability to Be Accepting

- a) You may not have the skills for acceptance; you do not know how to accept painful events and facts and confuse 'acceptance' with approval.
- b) Acceptance is recognising that there is nothing you can do to change the situation.
- c) Acceptance is the opposite of fighting a lost cause or fighting a losing battle. Once distress has turned up in your awareness, fighting to get rid of it will only magnify it.
- d) You mistakenly believe that if you accept a painful event, you are making light of it or are approving of it.
- e) Acceptance does not mean that you can't do things to prevent future painful events.
- f) You get stuck on ruminating on negative thoughts and feelings which makes the bearable unbearable.



9. Practicing Radical Acceptance

-  First observe if you are questioning or fighting reality, e.g. thinking “It shouldn’t be this way” or “It’s not fair” etc.
-  Remind yourself that the unpleasant reality is just as it is and cannot be changed: “This is what has happened and it cannot be undone”.
-  Remind yourself that there are causes for reality being the way it is that are now completely outside your control because they are in the past.
-  Acknowledge that some sort of history led up to this moment. Consider how people’s lives are shaped by a series of causal events/factors. These causal events/factors and the history led up to this moment, means that this reality had to occur exactly as it is: “This is how things happened and it cannot be changed”.
-  Practice accepting with the whole of yourself (heart, mind, body). Be creative in finding ways to involve your whole self in the activity of acceptance using the strategies/skills in the previous pages and throw yourself fully into your life in the present moment. Use accepting self-talk; be your own cheerleader; use relaxation; use mindfulness of your breath; use the confidence posture, half-smiling and willing hands (see below); use imagery.
-  Practice opposite action. List all the behaviours you would do if you did accept the facts of your current situation exactly as they are. Then act ‘as if’ you have already accepted those facts, and engage in the behaviours that you would do ‘as if’ you really have accepted the way things are.
-  Imagine (in your mind’s eye) that what you don’t want to accept is actually acceptable and tolerable, even if you don’t like it. Rehearse in your mind what you would do ‘as if’ you accept what seems unacceptable.
-  Attend to your body sensations as you think about what you need to accept.
-  Allow space for disappointment, sadness, or grief to arise within you as a natural part of being human, they are not feelings that can be rejected, that will just magnify them, they are feelings that are a part of you and need validation so you can heal and grow.
-  Acknowledge that life is worth living even when there is pain and that a life without pain is impossible for all humans.



10. Focused Attention and Turning the Mind

Focusing your attention or turning the mind is like facing a fork in the road. You must turn your mind toward the acceptance road, and away from the road of rejecting reality. Turning the mind is choosing to accept what is and taking your attention away from fighting reality and focusing it instead in the direction you want your life to go in. The choice to accept puts you on the path to acceptance, then it is necessary to work at accepting. The following steps should help you:



Observe that you are not accepting. Look for anger, bitterness, annoyance; avoiding emotions; saying "Why me?", "Why is this happening?", "I can't stand this." "It shouldn't be this way." "It's not fair." – these are all signs of non-acceptance and rejecting reality.



Make space and go within yourself, make an inner commitment to accept your reality exactly as it is.



Do it again, over, and over. Keep turning your mind to acceptance each time you come to the fork in the road where you can reject reality or accept it.



Find out what works for you so you can develop a plan for catching yourself when you drift out of acceptance and have started to battle/fight reality.



11. The Concept of Willingness



Willingness is readiness to enter and participate fully in your life and living and to find a willing and accepting response to each situation when it is clear you have no choice but to accept reality exactly as it is.



Willingness is doing just what is needed in each situation and wholeheartedly, without dragging your feet.



Willingness is not acting impulsively on strong emotions, but becoming still and listening very carefully to your 'Wise Mind', and then acting from your 'Wise Mind'. 'Wise Mind' is the wisdom within each person, where you can see the value of both reason and emotion and you are able to bring both together and to take the middle path so that facts, reason and logic are equal to but not better than emotions and values, and vice-versa. See the Mindfulness document for more information on 'Wise Mind'.



Willingness is acting with awareness that you are connected in the universe, to the stars, planets, milky way, to all people (those you like and do not like), to the earth, the floor, the ocean, all animals etc. You belong here, you are worthy and as good and valuable as anyone else.

Replace Willfulness with Willingness



Wilfulness is refusing to tolerate the moment.

Wilfulness is refusing to make the changes that are needed.

Wilfulness is giving up on yourself.

Wilfulness is the opposite of "doing what works."

Wilfulness is trying to fix every situation with your mind.

Wilfulness is insisting on being in control of what cannot be controlled.

Wilfulness is attachment to ego, it is stubbornness, intolerance, impatience, it is saying "I want what I want right now."

Willingness Step-by-Step



1. Observe your own wilfulness. Label it. Experience it.
2. Radically accept that at this moment you feel (and maybe are acting) wilfully. You cannot fight wilfulness with more wilfulness.
3. Turn your mind toward acceptance and willingness.
4. Try the confidence, half-smiling and a willing hands postures.
5. When you seem stuck in wilfulness, identify the threat, ask yourself: "What and where is the threat to me?"



12. Accepting Reality with the Help of Your Body

Remember the nervous system connects every part of your body to every other part and your brain is part of your body. The brain and body form one single physiological system and there are complex feedback loops from body to brain and from the brain to body. So, your physical posture is important: a relaxed and confident posture with open chest, open hands, uncrossed arms and a gentle smile will help create emotions in yourself that match.

Half-Smile



1. Relax your face from the top of your head down to your chin and jaw. Let go of each facial muscle (forehead, eyes, and brows; cheeks, mouth, and tongue; teeth slightly apart). Try tensing your facial muscles and then letting go to help you notice when your facial muscles are relaxed.
2. Let both corners of your lips go slightly up, just so you can feel them. It is not necessary for others to see it. A half-smile is slightly upturned lips with a relaxed face.
3. Try to adopt a serene facial expression. Remember, your face communicates to your brain and vice-versa via the unitary nervous system that extends to every cell in the body.

Willing Hands



1. Standing: Drop your arms down from your shoulders; keep them straight or bent slightly at the elbows. With hands unclenched, turn your hands outward, with thumbs outwards, palms up, and fingers relaxed.
2. Sitting: Place your hands on your lap or your thighs. With hands unclenched, turn your hands with palms facing up and fingers relaxed.
3. Lying down: Arms by your side, hands unclenched, turn your palms up with fingers relaxed.

Confidence Posture



1. Imagine a cord running up your spine and coming out of the top of your head, then take hold of the imaginary cord and pull it up so that your spine becomes straight.
2. Roll your shoulders backwards so that your chest sticks out and you create more space in your rib cage so you can breathe more deeply.
3. Start paying attention to your breathing, slowly fill your lungs by inhaling through your nose and then very slowly exhale through your nose. Notice all the different sensations in your body as you breathe in and breathe out. Keep paying attention to your breathing until you finish this exercise.
4. Slightly raise your chin to enhance the straightness of your back and exude confidence.
5. Add a Half-Smile.
6. Add Willing Hands.
7. Practice for one or two minutes each time you notice your posture has slumped.
8. Set aside regular time to practice for 10-15 minutes when you won't be disturbed and can relax fully.



Ways to Practice Half-Smiling, Willing Hands & Confidence Posture



Notice your posture and facial expression when you first wake up in the morning. Put a sign somewhere that you will see when you open your eyes to remind you to set a half-smile, do willing hands and/or a confident posture and also practice a few breaths of conscious breathing.



Every time you notice you breathing or your posture during the day, set a half-smile, do willing hands and/or a confident posture and also practice a few breaths of conscious breathing.



Set some time aside each evening to practice setting a half-smile, doing willing hands and/or the confidence posture whilst practicing conscious breathing. You can do this in silence or if you prefer whilst listening to calming music.



Whenever you start to feel negative emotion, set a half-smile with willing hands, the confidence posture and conscious breathing.



When negative emotions escalate quickly and become intensely distressing, find a quiet place to lie down. Make yourself comfortable and then combine the Paired Muscle Relaxation and Breathing (see above) with the body posture components of half-smile, willing hands and confidence posture. This can be done with quiet soothing music in the background, or silence if you prefer. Practice for between 5-10 minutes or for as long as you can or want to.

Dissolving Anger and Resentment Exercise



Whilst practicing half-smile, willing hands, confidence posture and conscious breathing, contemplating the person that is distressing you or that you are angry with:

1. Sit or lie down, breathe calmly and slowly from your tummy, adopt half-smile, willing hands and the confidence posture.
2. Bring to mind the person who you believe has caused you suffering.
3. Ask yourself what might cause suffering in that person's daily life?
4. Examine what you think might motivate that person to act the way they do?
5. Consider if that person is self-aware? Does this person have an open and kind mind, or have they been influenced by prejudices, narrow-mindedness, hatred, or anger?
6. When you reflect on that person, do they present as someone who is a master of themselves or are they following the crowd and unduly influence by others?
7. Ask yourself if you can feel compassion for this person as you contemplate that they will have a life with pain and difficulty just like everyone else?
8. You may need to practice this exercise many times on the same person to dissolve the hurt and distress you feel.
9. The purpose of this exercise is nothing to do with forgiving the person you feel has hurt you, it is to enable you to let go of any resentment and anger that is bringing you down and being forgiving and compassionate towards yourself.