

MENTAL PREPAREDNESS EXERCISES

The following exercises have been adapted for use with our Mental Preparedness eLearning course.

EXERCISE 1: Plank Comparison

This exercise helps participants orient to their own unique feeling of good stress.

Practice:

1. Lie on your back, on the ground, in a comfortable position.
2. Slowly count to 20.
3. Notice how you feel.
4. Roll onto your stomach.
5. Bring your hands or elbows underneath your shoulders. Pressing into the floor with your elbows/hands and feet, lift your body off the ground (see picture below).



6. Hold this plank shape as you slowly count to 20.
7. Lower yourself down to the floor.
8. Notice how you feel.

The plank may feel more stressful than lying on the floor, because you put more pressure on your muscles and body than simply lying on your back. But this stressor is not bad for you. This is an example of a good stressor.



EXERCISE 2: Fast Breathing

NOTE: If you have heart issues or asthma, do not do this exercise.

Practice:

1. Sit or lie down in a supported position
2. Put one hand on your chest
3. Breathe in and out through your mouth or nose rapidly.
4. Do this for up to 30 seconds - STOP if you feel light-headed.

Most participants in this exercise will report feeling light headed, dizzy, or tingling.

Involuntary fast breathing is one sign that your amygdala is taking over your body when it senses a threat. Typically we 'freeze' for a moment to orient to the threat, then we start breathing fast and shallow to suck in more oxygen for our muscles to be ready to act. This is fine if you are fighting or running away, but if you being threatened cannot move, you will become more light headed and unable to think well. This is because the oxygen and carbon dioxide balance in your blood are becoming imbalanced and will cause you to panic more.

EXERCISE 3: Deep Breathing

This exercise helps to manage your breathing and stay in control of your breath pattern, thus keeping control of your prefrontal cortex and lowering your heart rate. It is a simple exercise, but takes a LOT of practice to learn how to do this in an emergency.

Practice:

1. Sit or lie still in a comfortable, supported position.
2. Breathe in slowly for 4 seconds, hold for 1 second, breathe out for 5 seconds.
3. Repeat three to four times.

When you practice this kind of breathing, you may notice that every time you breathe in, your heart rate goes up, and every time you breathe out, your heart rate naturally goes down. This is called sinus arrhythmia and it is completely normal. You can hack your own biology by making your exhale breaths slightly longer than your inhale breaths in order to lower your heart rate. As your heart rate lowers, your body starts to tell your brain that you are not in a crisis. And your hippocampus can start dampening the stress response.

Practice this over and over until it becomes a comfortable and natural response. You shouldn't strain to control your breath.



EXERCISE 4: Muscle Tension

For this exercise, you will be progressively tensing and relaxing muscle groups. If you have any pain or discomfort, skip that muscle or group. It can help to visualize the muscles tensing and then a wave of relaxation flowing over them as you release that tension. Keep breathing throughout the exercise.

Practice:

1. Stand, sit or lie down comfortably.
2. Take a deep breath through the abdomen, hold for a few seconds, exhale slowly.
3. Tightly, but without straining, clench your fists and hold for 5 seconds, release
4. Without moving your arms, flex your bicep muscles, hold for 5 seconds, release
5. Continue practicing, alternating tensing and relaxing muscle groups down your body for as long as you'd like. Make sure to explore your shoulders and neck, glutes, legs, and feet.

If you find yourself in a difficult situation, such as an illegal checkpoint or a hostage situation, you may feel a loss of control or agency to the people who are in control. Focusing on something concrete, can not only increase your sense of control, but can also give your mind something to focus on during a difficult experience. For example, in almost any situation, you can tense and relax your muscles without there being any visible sign of this.

EXERCISE 5: Touch (to be done with a partner if available)

This simple trust exercise helps us understand the power of social connection and touch.

Practice:

1. Find a partner to help you with this exercise.
2. Stand next to them. Close your eyes (their eyes should remain open).
4. Take five or six steps forward away from your partner.
5. Stand next to them and hold their hand. Close your eyes.
6. Have your partner lead you forward 5-6 steps while you keep your eyes closed.
7. Notice how it feels to touch someone. Do you like it? Does it give you confidence?

If you are in a hostage situation and can briefly touch a colleague's arm, you will notice a sense of relief and control.



EXERCISE 6: Mental Images

Our brain has the amazing ability to time travel. We can focus our mind on past or future experiences that momentarily allow us to step away from the bad situation we might be in.

Practice:

1. Sit or lie still, in a supported position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Chose one of the following thought exerrcises to explore:
 - a. Imagine your favorite place (e.g. the beach, the mountains). Take time to describe for yourself the colors, sounds, smells, and other sensory elements of the place.
 - b. Imagine your favorite activity (e.g. going for a run, reading a book). Describe the physical sensations of this activity to yourself.
 - c. In your mind, recite a favorite poem, sacred text, or meaningful words.
 - d. In your mind, sing your favorite song.
 - e. Imagine anything else that brings you joy like a past experience or an event in the future.

If you are a person of faith, you can recite memorized sacred texts or repeat prayers. If you aren't, you can think of books you have read or poems you may have memorized. If you enjoy a particular activity like hiking, you can imagine being on your favorite trail. If you enjoy music, you can listen in your mind to your favorite songs. Whatever it is you enjoy, you can do it in your mind without anyone knowing you are doing it.