



ELSA newsletter 11: Quick and easy ways to feel calmer

When we begin to feel upset, worried or annoyed, physical changes happen in our body. Our hearts beat faster, our breathing becomes faster and shallower and our muscles tense up. These are all normal reactions to a perceived threat: our body is getting ready for a “fight, flight or freeze” reaction to danger, as the stress chemicals adrenaline and cortisol fill our bodies.

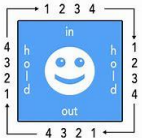
Sometimes we can deal with these feelings and physical sensations by moving away from the “threat” or doing physical exercise to lower the stress chemicals. But other times, that isn’t possible. Children might be about to start a test, preparing to go on stage or dealing with an argument on the football pitch. As adults we might be stuck in a traffic jam, having a difficult conversation with our boss, or having our patience tested by our children! In these situations, it’s useful to know some quick techniques that can help us feel calmer and allow us to think clearly and make good decisions.

This week’s [ELSA video](#) shows some of these techniques. Practise them with your child **when they are calm**, so that they are familiar for when they are upset. When a child is distressed, they won’t be able to learn something new or possibly even to hear what you are saying, so learn these skills in advance. Ask them what works best for them.

Breathing techniques

Slowing your breathing down instantly sends a calming message to your brain. Try these techniques to see which you like best:

Smell the hot chocolate: Take a slow, deep breath in through your nose, as if you are smelling a cup of hot chocolate. Hold for three seconds, then blow out slowly through your mouth, as if you are blowing away the steam and cooling it down.



Square breathing. Imagine a square, or trace one with your fingers. Breathe in slowly as your finger moves up one side of the square, hold your breath as it moves along side two, breathe out slowly along side three, and hold for side four. Repeat

Colour breathing: Give your angry feelings a colour. Are they red, orange, black? Slowly breathe out and imagine you are breathing that colour out. As you breathe in, imagine you are breathing in a peaceful colour, which is filling up your body.



Ocean breathing: Imagine waves crashing onto the beach. Breathe in slowly and imagine the sound of breathing in as a wave rolling back into the sea. Breathe out through your mouth and imagine the sound of breathing out as the wave crashing onto the beach.

Milkshake breathing: Imagine you are breathing bubbles through a straw into a milkshake. Breathe out slowly so the bubbles don’t splash out of the glass!



Finger breathing: Hold out one hand flat. Breathe in as you trace a finger up one side of your thumb. Hold your breath for a few seconds at the top, then breathe out as you trace your finger down the other side. Repeat for whole hand.

Tummy breathing: Place one hand on your stomach. As you breathe in, imagine you are inflating a balloon in your tummy - feel your hand rise. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then breathe out slowly as you imagine the balloon deflating, and feel your hand



Counting breathing: Count one as you breathe in slowly. Hold your breath for a few seconds, then count two as you breathe out slowly. Repeat until you get to ten.

Muscle tensing and relaxing

When we are upset or scared, our muscles tense up. Deliberately tensing then relaxing them releases the tension and makes our bodies feel calmer.

Squeeze the orange: Clench your fists, as if you are trying to squeeze all the juice out of an orange, then relax your hands and give them a shake.



Shoulder shrug: Pull your shoulders up to your ears then drop them and shake out the tension

Bear squeeze: Imagine you are a bear trying to get into your cave, but a rock has blocked the entrance. Tense all the muscles in your body to squeeze through the narrow gap, then shake them out and relax once you are in the cave.



Hand push: Put your hands flat together in front of your chest with your fingers pointing up to your chin. Push them together hard, then shake out your shoulders and relax.

Give yourself a hug: Cross your arms, hold onto your upper arms and squeeze, then relax.



Chair push up: Hold onto the sides or front of your chair and push yourself up so you are hovering just off the seat. You can keep your feet on the ground if you need to. Hold for a few seconds then lower down and shake out your shoulders.

Distraction

Sometimes we need to stop our minds dwelling on unhelpful thoughts, or break the cycle of worry. Focusing on what is happening around you right now can stop the rising feeling of panic.

Feel your feet: Wiggle your toes and feel the ground beneath your feet. Imagine you have an invisible pencil and draw around your foot, including each toe.



Use your senses: If you have time, tell yourself 5 things you can see, 4 you can feel, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell and 1 you can taste. If you don't have time for all 5 senses, make yourself take notice of the things that you can hear around you.

Challenge your brain: Count backwards in 3s; say your 7 times table; look for right angles; look for 3 things that start with the letter 'B'. Anything that challenges your brain will take your mind off your difficult thoughts and feelings and give your body a chance to calm down.



Self-talk

Telling ourselves that we are safe and that we can handle the situation can help control our body's stress reaction. Try phrases like "It's OK"; "I'm safe"; "I can do this"; "I've coped before"; "This won't last forever" will soothe and reassure.



If you feel your temper rising and you know you are likely to say or do something you'll regret, repeat a phrase like "Don't do it"; "Walk away"; "Ignore it" or even just "Stop" or "Slow" to put the brakes on and give you a moment to think of a better response.