

49 WAYS TO
THINK
YOURSELF WELL

Mind science in practice, one step at a time

JAN ALCOE AND EMILY GAJEWSKI



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*For our children, who teach us daily
about wise living and well-being*

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We would also like to acknowledge the many people we have been privileged to work with therapeutically, and what they have taught us about the power of the mind and the resilience of the human spirit.

49 Ways to Well-being Series



If you have selected this book, you may be looking for practical ways of improving your well-being. If you are a health and well-being practitioner or therapist, you may be helping your clients to improve theirs by encouraging them to practise some of the approaches it is based on. Well-being is a subjective state of 'feeling good' which has physical, mental, emotional and even spiritual dimensions.

Because these dimensions overlap and interact, it is possible to improve well-being by making positive changes in any one of them. For example, taking up regular exercise (a focus on physical well-being) may improve concentration (mental well-being), happiness (emotional well-being) and sense of purpose (spiritual well-being). This series of well-being books is designed to provide a variety of routes to recovering, sustaining, protecting and enhancing well-being, depending on your interests and motivations. While some emphasise psychological techniques, others are based on physical movement, nutrition, journaling and many other approaches.

Each book in the series provides 49 practical ways of improving well-being, based on a particular therapeutic approach and written by an expert in that field. Based on tried and

tested approaches, each title offers the user a rich source of tools for well-being. Some of these can be used effectively for improving general resilience; others are particularly helpful for specific problems or issues you may be dealing with, for example, recovering from illness, improving relaxation and sleep, or boosting motivation and self-confidence.

Enjoy dipping into any *49 Ways* book and selecting ones which catch your interest or help you to meet a need at a particular time. We have deliberately included many different ideas for practice, knowing that some will be more appropriate at different times, in different situations and with different individuals. You may find certain approaches so helpful or enjoyable that you build them into everyday living, as part of your own well-being strategy.

Having explored one book, you may be interested in using some of the other titles to add to your well-being 'toolbox', learning how to approach your well-being via a number of different therapeutic routes.

For more information about the series, including current and forthcoming titles, visit www.stepbeachpress.co.uk/well-being

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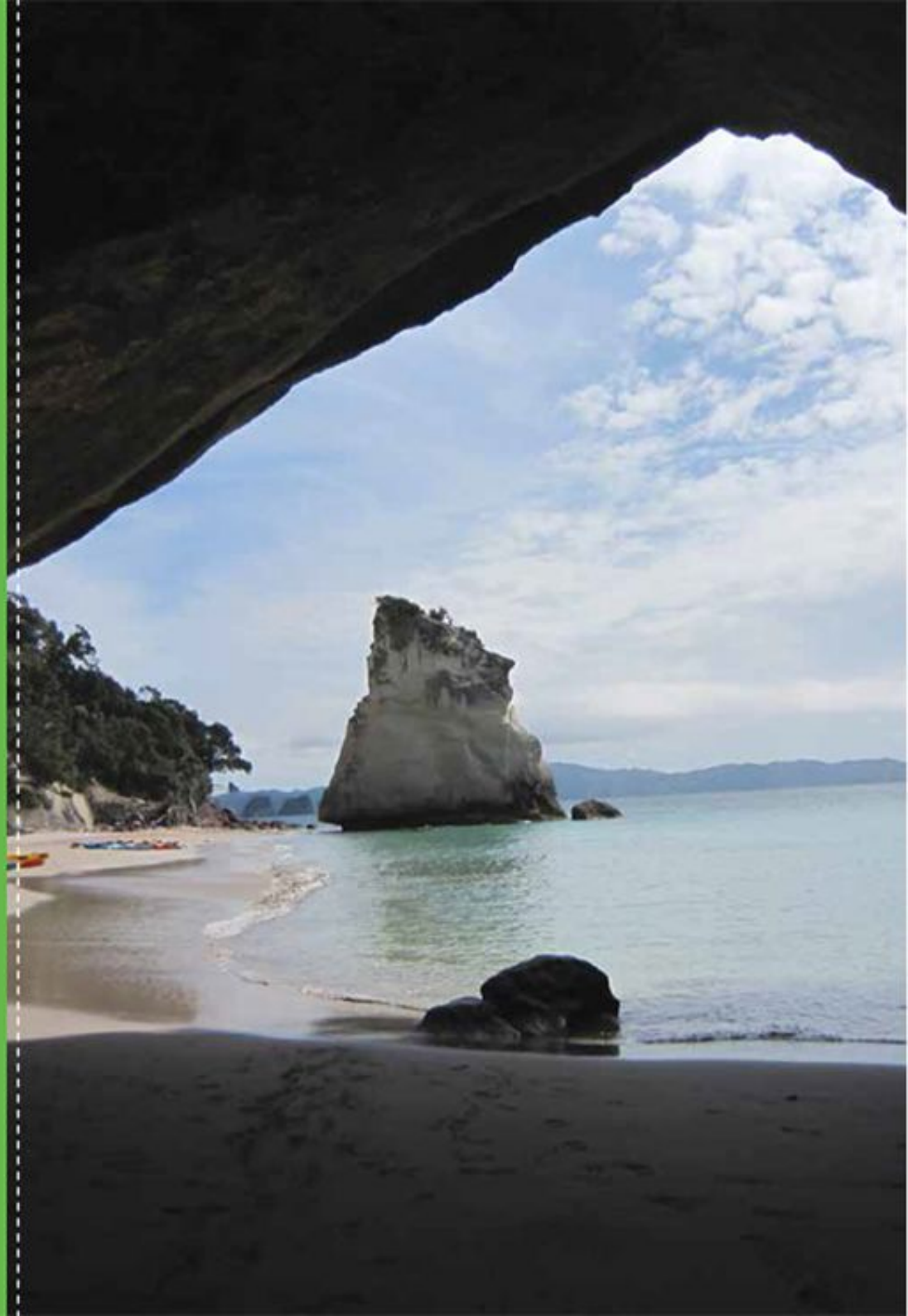
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *49 Ways to Think Yourself Well*. As you dip into this guide, you will be learning about and using a wide range of ideas and techniques to improve your well-being, drawn from the broad field of contemporary psychology, including cognitive behaviour therapy, cognitive mindfulness, occupational therapy, hypnotherapy, Human Givens therapy, positive psychology, compassion-focused therapy and neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). All these approaches have evolved from research into our innate mental resources and the strong links between our thinking, emotions and behaviour. This guide will steer you around the pitfalls of negative thinking, harmful emotions and stress-led behaviours which will impair your physical and mental well-being. You can then learn how to use your own mental resources in positive ways to meet your needs, whether to improve your physical health, boost your confidence or motivation, keep calm in the face of challenge, improve your relationships or reach peak performance.



STARTING OUT

While you can start using the ideas and activities in this book in any order, we would encourage you to begin with some fundamentals, which we have organised into Chapter 1. These are designed to calm, relax and focus you. Many of the techniques introduced in this book work most effectively when you are in a relaxed state because your mind is then best able to problem solve, see things in perspective, and access a whole host of unconscious resources which you may not even know are there! You may want to begin by discovering what it is like to be deeply relaxed on a regular basis, and how this can help you to tackle issues you might want to address. If a particular activity or technique requires that you begin by relaxing, you will be pointed to one of these preliminary exercises first. You can also practise deep relaxation techniques by accessing the free audio downloads which accompany this book, on the Step Beach website www.stepbeachpress.co.uk/well-being.

GLOSSARY

There is a glossary at the back of this book which explains some of the terms used in more detail. Any words that appear in the glossary have an asterisk next to them in the text, like this*.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Finally, we have listed some useful resources, should you wish to explore any of the themes or psychological approaches in more depth.

A NOTE OF WARNING

This guide is not intended to replace seeking medical or professional help for significant physical, emotional or mental problems.

We would suggest that this is essential if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Undiagnosed pain, physical symptoms or sleep problems
- Symptoms of depression, such as loss of motivation, loss of appetite, changes in sleeping habits, persistent negative thinking
- High levels of anxiety or anger or recurring panic attacks
- Substance misuse or self-harming behaviours
- Social isolation due to severe lack of confidence or self-esteem
- Persistent relationship difficulties.

Each numbered 'way' provides a significant route to recovering, preserving or enhancing your well-being. It will usually include:

- underpinning theory, evidence or information on a particular issue and helpful approaches
- a 'Tip' for making an immediate, small change in how you think or feel
- a 'Try this', longer activity to put theory into practice
- numbered references to support factual information (full details of which can be found at the back of the book)
- a 'See also' which suggests other, numbered 'ways' which you may find it helpful to look at.

We have organised the 49 Ways into categories of common challenges and needs which we may come across in our lives.

A GUIDE TO THE CHAPTERS

Chapter 1: Lay the Foundations for Well-being: Some mind science basics

This chapter helps you to lay down some important foundation stones for well-being based on the science of the mind.

It introduces an evidence-based list of emotional needs which are essential to well-being and happiness. You can rate how well you are getting those needs met and begin to plan some positive changes. You will learn about the importance of 'switching off' the body's 'fight-or-flight' or stress response* when it is not needed, thus avoiding many stress-related health problems. You can try some effective techniques for deep relaxation based on mindfulness and visualisation. You can begin to identify and connect with internal and external resources which you can draw on to support your

well-being, particularly in challenging times. All these practices underpin the contents of this book. Learning to use them will enable you to harness the power of your mind to enhance well-being on many levels.

Two free audio downloads are available to support this chapter at www.stepbeachpress.co.uk

Chapter 2: Deal with Stress, Anxiety, Panic and Worry

The stress response can be triggered by our fears, anxiety and worry and can sometimes lead us into a full-blown panic attack. This chapter will help you to avoid unnecessary stress in your life by concentrating on what you can change. You will learn how to evoke a sense of calm in stressful situations, and how to handle or avoid panic attacks to help you stay in control of your life. You can practise techniques for reducing the amount of time spent worrying and some emergency strategies for distracting yourself away from fear, anxiety and worry. Reducing your response to stress in these ways will enhance your well-being and put you back in control of your life.

Two free audio downloads are available to support this chapter on www.stepbeachpress.co.uk

Chapter 3: Control Negative Thinking and Avoid Depression

How we think is closely linked to how we feel and how we then act in our lives. We can sometimes believe that we are our thoughts and this can lead us into a state of hopelessness and helplessness. Negative

thinking can trigger the stress response and is at the heart of depression. This chapter will help you to separate yourself from your thoughts, so that you can be objective about their content. You can learn about common errors of thinking so that you can guard against them. It is important to challenge negative thoughts and consciously change them, and there are several techniques included for doing just this. Finally, we cover the importance of understanding the cycle of depression which can be triggered by constant negative thinking, called rumination. Learning to avoid this pattern of thinking will help to ensure that you continue experiencing motivation and pleasure in life.



Chapter 4: Reduce Anger

Uncontrolled rage and anger are extremely destructive to our health, relationships, property and community. Our daily lives can often include so little 'down time' that stress levels creep up and up to the point where we 'boil over'. If you are someone with trauma or unresolved emotional difficulties from the past, you are also more likely to be at the mercy of uncontrolled anger. Whilst feeling angry

at injustice or wrongdoing in the world can spur us forward to do something productive, uncontrolled outbursts of anger lead only downwards and, at their worst, can be life-threatening.

This chapter explains what is going on in the brain when anger starts to rise and what we can do to prevent this happening. You can learn strategies to nip it in the bud so that you just don't get to boiling point, and how to review and change how you react in anger-provoking situations. This will help you to keep your rational mind in charge of your life so you can live your life how you would like to, more of the time.

Chapter 5: Improve Physical Health and Sleep

There is a growing body of research which demonstrates the interconnections between the brain, behaviour, immunity and health. For example, how we use our minds, including our thoughts, expectations and how we interpret life's events, can greatly impact upon our body's cellular activity and immunity and a whole host of physiological functions (12). This chapter will help you learn ways of creating an image of wellness and reducing the harmful effects of stress by 'self-soothing'. Pain has a strong psychological element, so you can practise ways of reducing pain and discomfort. You can also foster positive expectations about medical treatment and your body's ability to heal.

Sleep is often disturbed by stress and we develop unhelpful patterns of behaviour which can make it difficult to get deep rest at night. This chapter also includes tips on sleep hygiene and ways of changing thoughts and feelings around sleep. Finally, you can learn how to use the natural dream state to get off to a good night's sleep.

Chapter 6: Set Goals and Boost Your Motivation

How often have you felt the frustration of promising yourself that you *will* make a change, whether starting a new routine or achieving something important to you, only to find yourself a few months down the line having not achieved those things, *again*? Our basic human need to feel in control of our lives, to learn and feel challenged, and have a sense of achievement are all assaulted by this sense of failure. If it is continually repeated, life can start to feel 'stuck', empty or even meaningless. It is for this important reason that we have devoted this chapter to achieving goals. In this chapter you will find an opportunity to stand back and refocus on what is important in your life. You can then learn how to set realistic and achievable goals and, most importantly, how to motivate yourself to achieve them. Rather than floating aimlessly through life, you will have gained some practical skills to begin moving in just the right direction for you.

Chapter 7: Enhance Your Assertiveness, Self-esteem and Confidence

There is a wealth of self-help material available for people who feel lacking in self-esteem and confidence, which is perhaps an indication of what a common complaint this is. Trying to feel better about ourselves can prompt us to go down all sorts of unhelpful avenues and sometimes this can lead to unhealthy or destructive habits, which we address in Chapter 9. This chapter will help you take effective steps to becoming a more confident person, starting by cultivating a sense of achievement, which meets an important emotional need in all of us. It goes on to distil some of the best, evidence-based techniques

and tools around, providing a practical guide to feeling better about yourself and behaving more assertively. Acting confidently, setting boundaries and saying what you mean may feel unfamiliar and challenging. Don't worry, there are tips along the way that will help you take the plunge and then follow easy steps to becoming a more confident person.

Chapter 8: Improve Communication and Relationships

Relationships are at the heart of so much of what we do in all areas of our life - work, family and leisure. This chapter will help you to hone your skills of communication and relationship building. It begins by introducing theoretical and practical techniques for developing rapport with other people, so that you can better understand how they feel and learn how to see their point of view. You can then look at some of the basic differences in the way in which men and women's brains function, which can make a big, positive difference when trying to negotiate with the opposite sex!

You can learn some effective ways for diffusing conflict in relationships, helping you to express feelings and move forward, rather than get locked into destructive patterns or arguments.

Finally, you can be on the look-out for relationship busters - the behaviours which may lead to conflict and melt-down. All of these approaches apply not only in intimate relationships but all relationships, with wider family members, colleagues and friends. By applying some of the ideas in practice, you can quickly feel freed and on the road to more constructive and helpful relationships in your life.

Chapter 9: Change Unhelpful Patterns

When we are depleted, through excessive stress, traumatic events, loneliness or boredom, we all have the potential to reach out for destructive 'quick fixes'. The common ground with any habits is that they give an initial rush of chemical-induced pleasure within the brain. However, these positive feelings are shortly followed by feelings of regret, self-loathing and a dramatic drop in mood. We are all drawn to different habits; some of us will be drawn to an instant chemical hit from alcohol, caffeine, drugs or food; some of us will use the comfort or even pain of repetitive nail-biting or skin-picking/cutting to induce the soothing hit of natural endorphins; some of us may behave in ways that temporarily get our emotional need for attention or love met, such as shopping beyond our means or sex with strangers.

This chapter is focused on helping you 'take the high road' away from behaviours that you know are not working for you, however alluring they seem at the time.

It introduces a cycle of change which helps you to understand how to change and how to avoid the danger of self-sabotage. You will be able to identify your 'point of no return' in habitual behaviours and then move away from it. Finally, you can learn how to develop a more compassionate approach to your habit, which avoids the emotions of shame, blame and self-criticism which in themselves can be overwhelming. These models and techniques will help you to finally leave old habits behind and develop healthy and productive ways of coping with whatever life throws your way.

Chapter 10: Reach the Peak of Well-being

This final chapter helps you to put the icing onto the cake of well-being. Having explored how to use the mind to recover and improve well-being in a number of key ways, you can turn your attention to what you want and how you wish to feel as you move forwards in your life. You can use the power of the 'dreaming brain' to come up with new ideas and solutions. Much of this chapter is based on positive emotions as the key to building resilience and a lifetime of well-being. This includes how to develop positive emotions about the future, through cultivating optimism; positive emotions about the past, through gratitude and forgiveness; and positive emotions about the present, through using your signature strengths and enjoying the benefits of getting into flow*. Finally, we all have the opportunity of connecting our 'inner spirit' with our outer world, in terms of discovering a meaning and purpose in life. Paying attention to this need for connection can enhance our mental and physical health and completes the 'circle' of well-being. It enables us to give out and connect with others, to appreciate the beauty in the world and continue to be curious about our well-being and our very existence.

We hope you enjoy the journey.

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Chapter 1

LAY THE FOUNDATIONS OF WELL-BEING: SOME MIND SCIENCE BASICS

This chapter helps you to lay down some important foundation stones for well-being based on the science of the mind. It introduces an evidence-based list of emotional needs which are essential to well-being and happiness. You can rate how well you are getting those needs met and begin to plan some positive changes. You will learn about the importance of 'switching off' the body's fight-or-flight or stress response when it is not needed, thus avoiding many stress-related health problems. You can try some effective techniques for deep relaxation based on mindfulness and visualisation. You can begin to identify and connect with internal and external resources which you can draw on to support your well-being, particularly in challenging times. All these practices underpin the contents of this book. Learning to use them will enable you to harness the power of your mind to enhance well-being on many levels.

WAY 1

Bulletproof your happiness

Meeting your emotional needs is essential for mental well-being.

There are hundreds of theories in psychology, all of which tell us they have the answers to our mental health. It's no wonder that many of us make confused and unsuccessful attempts at finding happiness and don't know where to turn for effective help.

Psychologists Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell, founders of the Human Givens approach, were indeed puzzled by the plethora of psychological theories, particularly when compared with, for instance, biological theory, where there is one accepted model of how the human body works! With this confusion in mind, Griffin, Tyrrell and colleagues, set about a research project spanning many years, which put under the microscope all available psychological theory and techniques relating to mental well-being. Their aim was to draw

together an evidence-based list from these many sources, one which could inform us as humans, what it is we need in our lives to be emotionally well. The resulting list of **emotional needs** (1) means that we no longer need to scabble in the dark for what might make us happy. We now have a definitive checklist that we can refer to, noting where are scores are low and making adjustments in our lives accordingly.

Once you have rated your needs on the chart opposite, your task is to set yourself small goals, so you can begin shifting your scores higher. If this all seems rather daunting, see **WAY 28: Set realistic goals**, page 88, to help with the process!

NOTE

If any of your scores is under 3, they are likely to cause major stress in your life and may require some serious attention. If *many* of your scores are under 3, you may need to access professional help to prevent or deal with the emotional problems this can lead to.

Tip: Use this list particularly in times of change, eg. when you have moved house, changed job, or a relationship has ended. This is when we are particularly vulnerable, as our usual ways of getting our needs met may be compromised and we need to be creative about how to get them met in new ways.

WAY 2 Switch off the stress response

Learn to control one of the most basic and vital, underlying factors in our physical and mental health. By switching off the 'stress response' you can switch into relaxation and well-being.

Many of the chapters in this book are designed to help you prevent or counter what we call the stress response, often known as the 'fight-or-flight' response.

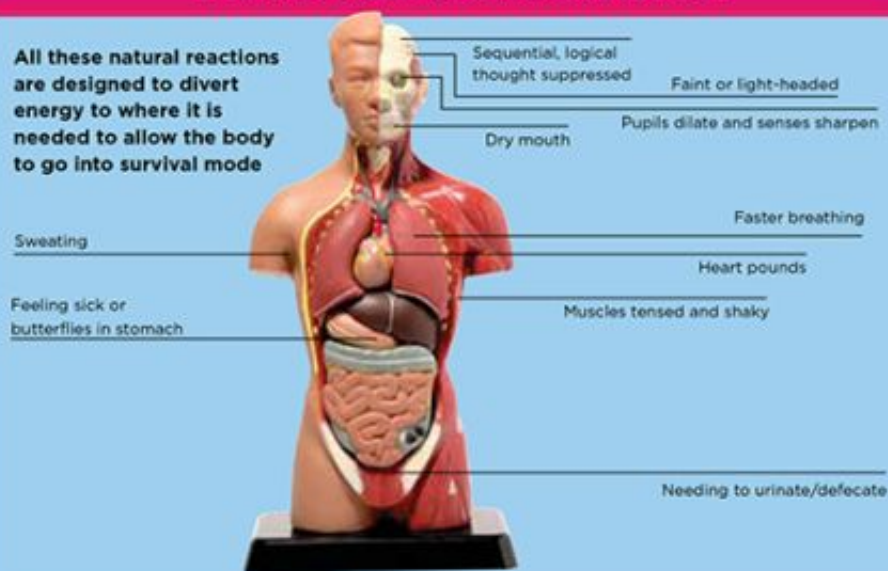
The human brain is hard-wired for survival. The amygdala* is part of the limbic system (the 'emotional brain') and is involved in many of our emotions and motivations, particularly those that are related to survival. Picture this as a burglar alarm in your house. While you are sleeping soundly, it constantly scans your

environment for signs of danger, based on the sensory memories of your past experiences. If it recognises a threatening *sound* – a loud crash, *sight* – a looming shadow, *sensation* – crawling on the skin, or other sign of danger, it will activate. This will occur before you have had time to investigate whether a burglar has broken in or an overnight guest has decided to go downstairs for a drink of water!

When the alarm is activated powerful hormones, including adrenaline*, are released throughout the body, prompting a whole host of physiological changes to enable you to either fight or flee the danger. At this point, you may notice your heart palpitating, your body shaking and sweating and your breath coming in gasps, because your whole body has been mobilised for action. The survival mechanism is firmly based on 'live first and ask questions later'! Look at the diagram below.

THE STRESS RESPONSE IN ACTION

All these natural reactions are designed to divert energy to where it is needed to allow the body to go into survival mode



Unfortunately, the stress response can 'kick off' in a whole range of situations which we associate with fear but which are not, in themselves, life-threatening. For example, being faced with unreasonable work demands, giving a public performance, going into a hospital, or even when we just *imagine* ourselves in uncomfortable situations. The effects may impair our ability to control our body, for example, when we find ourselves shaking and sweating as we walk onto the stage to give a public talk.

Feeling stressed also means that we are more prey to our emotions, which operate from a 'threat or no-threat', 'good or bad' perspective. As the temperature rises, the emotional brain hijacks the higher neocortex (the 'thinking brain') which normally provides a more intelligent analysis of what is happening, following the initial danger trigger.

Consequently, we find ourselves unable to think clearly, keep things in perspective and make good judgments. For example, we may feel threatened in a meeting, and as our level of upset or anger increases, we are unable to make the fine distinctions we need to analyse and calmly influence opinions in the room.

When we are highly stressed, our anxiety may 'spill over' into a full-blown panic attack and we then experience more extreme physiological and mental effects (see **WAY 9: Don't panic!**, page 40).

If we do not allow our bodies to recover and re-balance, long-term stress hormones such as cortisol are released. In time, these can negatively affect our health, impairing our immune system, digestion, sleep and sex

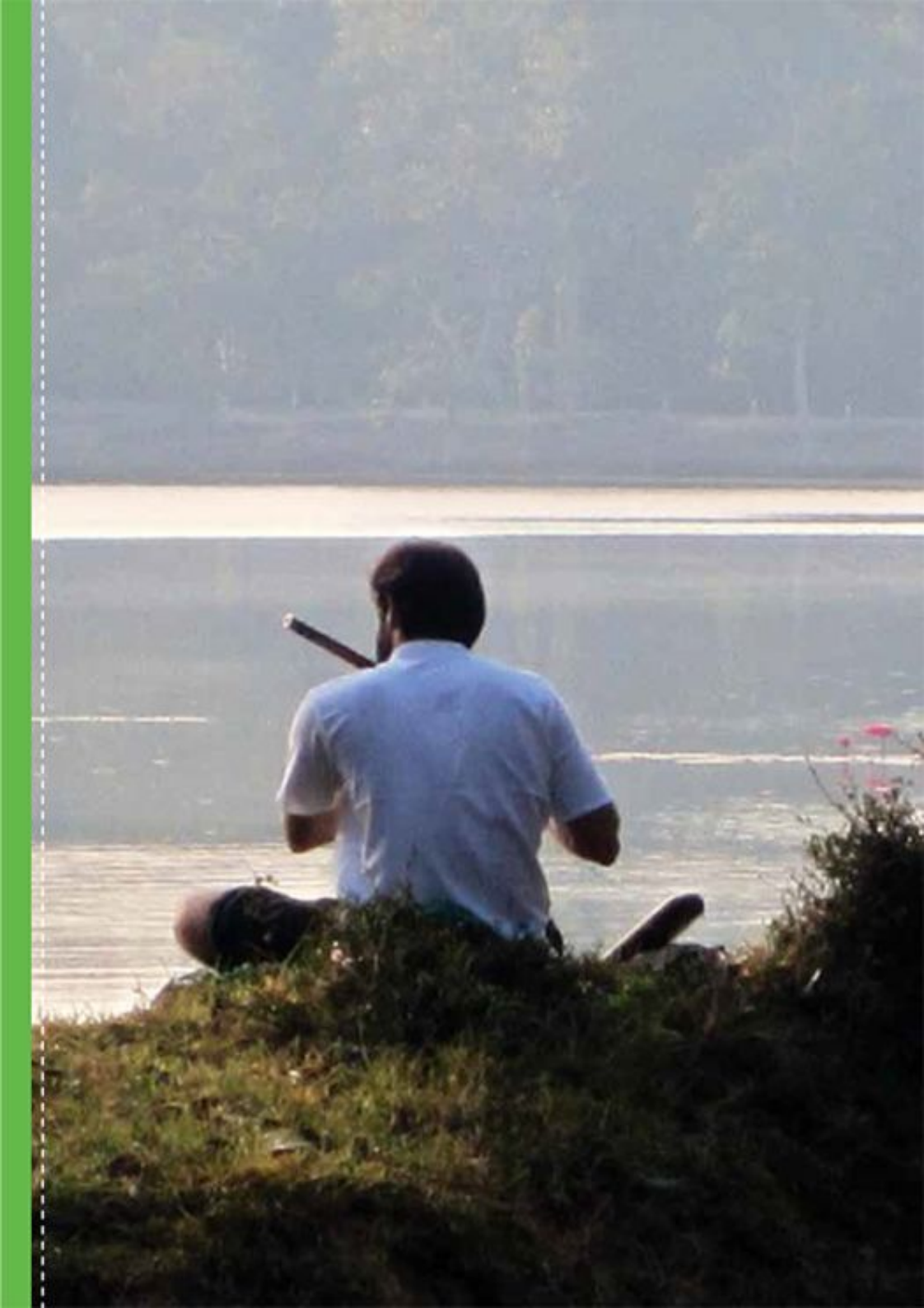
drive, or paving the way into depression, generalised anxiety or other mental difficulties (see **WAY 22: Break the link between stress and ill-health**, page 74).

We all need an optimum level of stress to be able to perform effectively when we need to, and sometimes we need the extra emotional arousal to give a big performance. However, being able to 'switch off' the stress response and 'switch on' the body's relaxation response (see page 26) avoids a build-up of stress hormones and is essential to our well-being – physically, mentally and emotionally. Stress and relaxation are two sides of the same coin, linked as they are to two different branches of the central nervous system. We can't experience feelings of relaxation and tension at the same time.

When we get stressed, we begin to breathe in short gasps. If we don't take any physical action, for example, running away or fighting for 'survival', then we take in more oxygen than we can use. As it is breathed out again, it takes carbon dioxide, essential to the absorption of oxygen by the body, with it. If too much carbon dioxide is lost from the body, we begin to experience the terrifying feeling of suffocating or choking, even though we are still breathing. One of the quickest ways to stop the stress response escalating (and stimulate the relaxation response) is to focus on a rhythm of breathing called 7/11 breathing.

NOTE

In a small number of cases, anxiety symptoms can be triggered by a physical condition, such as thyroid disorder or heart irregularity, or by a sudden change in consumption of caffeine, alcohol or tranquillisers.



7/11 breathing for instant relaxation

Breathe in (preferably through the nose) for a count of 7. Then breathe out more slowly to a count of 11. The longer out breath stimulates the body's natural relaxation response and quickly stops any panicky feelings. If you can't extend the out breath for 11, try breathing in to a count of 3, and out, more slowly, to a count of 5. Alternatively, just hold your breath while you continue counting and then take the next in breath.

Do this about 10 to 20 times, telling yourself that you are relaxing more with each breath.

Concentrate on the counting and notice how much less tense you feel in your body and mind.

This is also available as a free audio download on www.stepbeachpress.co.uk, along with a body scan relaxation.



SEE ALSO

- **WAY 3: Take a mindful approach to relaxation** (page 26)
- **WAY 8: Create an anchor for calm** (page 38)
- **Chapter 3: Control Negative Thinking and Avoid Depression** (pages 47 to 61)
- **WAY 17: Don't flip your lid! Stay cool and calm** (page 62)

Tip: If you feel your stress levels rising, focus the mind on a repetitive task for a minute or two, like counting backwards from 300 in 3s. This distracts away from thoughts which may be fuelling anxiety. Alternatively, take some vigorous exercise which uses the bodily changes which occur with the stress response for the purpose they were intended!

WAY 3

Take a mindful approach to relaxation

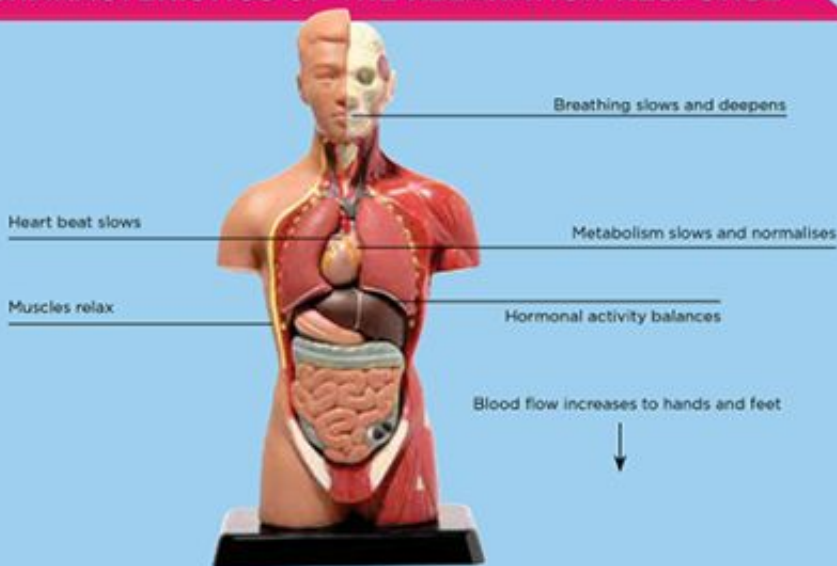
Learn how to prompt the body's relaxation response by practising mindfulness.

The relaxation response is the opposite of the stress response described in **WAY 2: Switch off the stress response**, page 22, and can be prompted by deep relaxation. There are untold benefits to practising relaxation on a regular basis. Not only does relaxation allow the body a chance to re-charge and repair, but it calms the mind so that we are more resourceful in how we handle situations, relate to others and make decisions. It is a foundation stone for well-being on all levels.

If you can create one part of this relaxation response, for example, slowing and deepening

your breathing, then the chain of other responses will follow. We can harness the mind to lead the body into deep relaxation and many activities in this book are designed to help you to do this. Mindfulness meditation* is a relaxation approach which gently focuses the mind on moment-by-moment experience, for example, on the *breath* entering and leaving the nostrils, or on each *part of the body* in turn, or on *sounds* as they occur in our surroundings. Training our attention to focus in this way, without trying to change anything, brings us fully into the present, away from worries about the past or unhelpful imaginings about the future. It is at the heart of Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)*, an internationally accepted therapeutic approach developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2) at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in the USA, and which has clinically proven benefits for people with depression, anxiety disorders and chronic pain (3).

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELAXATION RESPONSE



Mindfulness meditations

Choosing where and how we pay attention is the first step to training the mind to be more present and less 'scattered'. Try any of the mindfulness activities below, beginning with five minutes and slowly building up the time you spend in these ways. You will probably notice that the mind tends to skip about all over the place, from thought to thought and away from the present into the past and future. In fact, the mind seems to have a mind of its own! Each time you realise your mind has gone off track, bring it gently back to your mindful activity.

Mindful breathing

Get in touch with your breath by sitting or lying and placing one hand over your belly, or navel area. Notice how the belly rises with the in-breath and drops back with the out-breath. Focus on these physical sensations, with, and then without, the hand in place. There is no need to control or change the breath in any way, just allow it to come and go. Rest in the awareness of the physical sensations of the breath moving in and out of the body.

This is also available as a free audio download on www.stepbeachpress.co.uk

Mindful walking

This can be done indoors or outdoors. Focus on a 'pathway' of about 10 steps ahead. Stand with your feet parallel, your knees relaxed, arms held loosely by your sides and your gaze focused softly ahead. Feel the soles of your feet making contact with the ground, then bring your attention to the first step. Slow it right down, so that

you are aware of every tiny movement, as the heel rises, the calf muscles engage and the foot gradually leaves the ground and is placed down ahead. Be aware of how the balance in the body shifts, and how the back foot starts to lift from the heel to make the next step. When you complete your 10 mindful steps, turn around, and take 10 mindful steps back to your starting point.

Mindful listening

Sit comfortably and bring your attention to the ears. Be aware of any sounds as they arise and wherever they arise, without searching for them. Allow awareness to open to sounds which are near and far away, in front, behind and inside you, obvious sounds and more subtle sounds, the spaces of silence between sounds.



Mindful body scan

Make yourself comfortable and take your attention to your left foot. Invite your focus onto the sensations in your toes. If your attention wanders, as soon as you notice it has, bring it gently back. Gradually focus on each part of the foot in turn, then the lower leg and upper leg, before taking your attention to your right foot and repeating the procedure. You may need to bring your focus back many, many times or if you are very tired, you may even fall asleep. It doesn't matter. The important point is to accept things as they are. Move your focus onto each part of the body, moving slowly upwards, then down each arm into the hands and fingers, followed by the neck, face and head.

WAY 4 Practise the art of visualisation

Practise visualisation to enhance and improve well-being and to achieve your goals.

Throughout this book, you will find ideas and suggestions based on the practice of visualisation. One of the most powerful mental resources we have as humans is our imagination. We can use it to good effect, as when we imagine positive, fulfilling outcomes, or to bad effect, for example, when we imagine all kinds of future catastrophes and fuel our anxiety.

Positive visualisation is a wonderful tool which utilises our imaginations to effect all kinds of changes in how we feel. We can use it to work towards a goal by visualising the process for achieving success, for example, imagining going to the gym and exercising to get fit, or imagining the immune system seeking and destroying cancer cells. We can also use it to create mental pictures of the goal or result

as if it had already occurred, for example, imagining what it is like to be that new, strong, healthy person full of energy and stamina.

The art of visualisation is to use all your senses, not just 'seeing', but hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling textures, movement and sensations. We all have a dominant sense, but it is helpful to practise using others until your visualisation becomes a richer and richer experience. Visualisation focuses the attention inwards, creating a deeply relaxing, trance state. Trance is a natural state which we all dip into when we daydream, meditate, jog or otherwise become absorbed in our inner thoughts and experiences. It is sometimes called the REM (rapid eye movement) or 'programming state' (which also occurs when we dream at night). When we access REM, we create powerful images and we are open to new learning. Using this language of the unconscious mind to make requests for change and to rehearse those changes through guided imagery (visualisation), is a foundation of hypnotherapy*.



A staircase to relaxation

As a first step, we can use visualisation to create a healthy state of deep relaxation...

Make yourself comfortable in a place where you will not be disturbed. Notice how the body is supported - behind the head and back, under the legs and feet. As you breathe in and out, spend a few moments focusing on the belly rising and falling as the breath enters and leaves, without changing or forcing the breath in any way.

Now imagine that you are standing at the top of a flight of ten steps leading down to a special place of relaxation. This could be a place you remember being in and feeling really calm and peaceful, perhaps a holiday beach, country scene or cosy room, or it could be somewhere you imagine would be the most relaxing place you could possibly be in.

As your breathing begins to slow down, on each outbreath imagine taking one step down your staircase, holding on to a rail if you feel you need to. As you slowly descend, count down from 10 to 1 on each out-breath, looking forward to the scene that awaits you at the bottom. With the final step, imagine walking into your relaxing space.

Use all your senses to create as vivid a place as possible. See the colours, shapes and quality of light. Hear any sounds that add to your sense of relaxation. There may be smells or even tastes that remind you of calm. You may be able to sense textures, for example, the feeling of soft sand beneath your feet, or the warm, silky water of a bath lapping around your body.

Find somewhere to rest in this scene, as you continue to build and enjoy its features. Begin to notice relaxation spreading throughout your body, perhaps starting with your feet and working upwards to your head. Notice how your mind has quietened.



When you are ready, you can imagine leaving your scene, knowing you can return whenever you wish. Count back from 1 up to 10 as you imagine drifting up the staircase, step by step, and walking back into the room. Open your eyes and take a gentle stretch.

This is also available as a free audio download at www.stepbeachpress.co.uk

SEE ALSO

- **WAY 5: What you focus on is what you get** (page 30)
- **WAY 21: Think well, be well** (page 72)