

READER

DE-STRESS TECHNIQUES FOR ACTIVISTS



INTRODUCTION

As activists, we're quite often confronted to stressful situations: on actions, while being arrested, when experiencing state repression. But organising, meeting and taking care of everything and everyone can be stressful as well.

To make sure that all this stress and adrenaline is not stocked in our bodies and minds (and therefore cause mental, emotional or physical problems later on) we can deliberately use de-stress techniques – for ourselves or together with our comrades.

This reader is a summary of the de-stress techniques that were introduced during the Support & Recovery training in January 2018.

WHERE DO ALL THESE TECHNIQUES COME FROM?

Many of the de-stress techniques described here originate from the mindfulness discipline. Just by focusing on experiences in the present moment with a kind, non-judgmental attitude, the mind is relieved from a lot of stress and preoccupation already, as most of the stress is linked to events that happened in the past or worries about the future. Mindfulness also trains our bodily and mental awareness, enabling us to be receptive to signals of stress expressed by our bodies and minds before we cognitively realize that we are stressed, so that we can respond in an adequate way and in an earlier stage. The benefit of using mindfulness in stress-reduction is evidence based.

But not all techniques originate from mindfulness. In this reader you will also find breathing techniques used to manage physical pain that are used in systema or even during the birthing process. Some techniques are frequently used as energizers or 'grounders'.

All of them have been used in a Support & Recovery context and received good feedback from the persons to whom they've been offered.

PHYSICAL EXERCISES

SHAKING OFF THE STRESS

WHY: Take a look at animals or young children who have been confronted with stress or fear: they shake. For some weird reason, growing up, we were taught not to shake. It's often perceived as weak or childish. Such nonsense! Shaking is a healthy bodily response to stress as it liberates stress that was accumulated in tensed muscles and tissues. So shake it off...

WHEN: Use this exercise after moments that were high on adrenaline or that involved deep concentration.

HOW: If you're in a group, position in a circle. Start with shaking the right foot 10 times, than the left foot 10 times, right arm 10 times and left arm 10 times. Then again the right foot 9 times, left foot 9 times, right arm 9 times and left arm 9 times. Right foot 8 times.... et cetera. Continue until you reach 1.

Make the people count out loud with you, this invigorates the shaking and adds to the fun.

MORNING SHOWER

WHY: When we spend a long time thinking or talking (for example in a meeting or during organizing), all the energy is concentrated in the head and the mind. Often, we're hardly aware of the rest of our bodies. Touching different body parts brings our awareness back to our bodies and enables us to ground and experiences ourselves 'as a whole'.

WHEN: Use this exercise at the start of something (a day, a meeting, an action) to 'wake up' your body and mind or after moments that involved a lot of thinking and talking to reconnect with it.

HOW: If you're in a group, position in a circle. Start by opening the taps of an imaginary shower. With imaginary soap, wash your hair, rub your face and then, body part by body part, descend down to the toes of the feet.

VARIATIONS: If you think that people are not in the mood for the fun part of an imaginary shower, you can also do this exercise just by rubbing or gently tapping the body parts. Go from the crown of the head towards the toes for a grounding and calming effect, go from the toes to the crown of the head for an energizing and clearing effect.

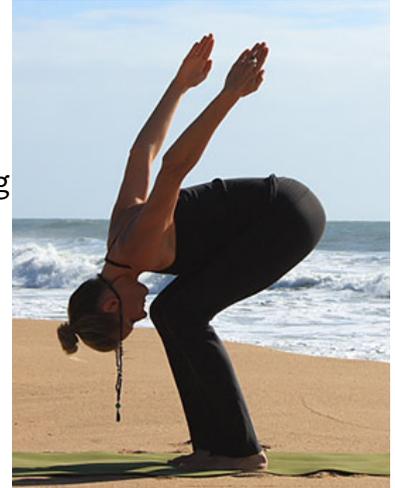
ARM SWEEP

WHY: We spend a lot of time with our energy mainly focused on cognitive activities. A lot of tension might build up in our bodies without that we even notice it. This exercise uses vigiourous breaths to release tension.

WHEN: After times of intense cognitive activities, such as thinking, speaking, organizing or problem-solving (or as a break).



HOW: Standing position, inhale and bring the arms up. While bending the knees, vigorously breathe out and sweep the arms down. Straighten the knees in a fluid movement at the pause between out breath and the next in breath, then bend the knees again while inhaling deeply and sweeping the arms up again until standing position. Repeat 5 – 8 times.



CENTERING

WHY: During chaotic moments, our minds might become just as chaotic (or fragmented, chatty or undecided). Centering the body helps the mind to center, ground and focus again.

WHEN: This exercise can be done during hectic moments, when we notice signals from the mind that it can't cope with the chaos, like indecisiveness or the feeling of being overwhelmed. But you can also use this exercise just before taking difficult decisions, to have a clearer mind and to 'let go of clutter'.

HOW: Standing position. While keeping the spine straight and the knees slightly bend (hands on the hips), start drawing large circles with the head, as if it were a huge imaginary pen. Then, slowly start spiraling inwards to make the circles smaller and smaller, until you've reached a point that feels centered. Rest and stabilize at this point for a few breaths.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

THREE MINUTES BREAK

WHY: When we are in the midst of a hectic event, such as a full action day, it's often difficult (if not impossible) to take a decent break. (And sometimes, when we do manage to take a break, we continue thinking or talking about things during this break). Taking a mindful and focused three minutes break is a good way to clear your mind, restore your energy and ground your awareness.

WHEN: During action days, training days or just before taking difficult decisions as a group or individually.

HOW: No need to sit down or stand up specially for this exercise. Just change something in your posture so that it expresses alertness and dignity, for example by sitting upright or standing centered on both feet (knees slightly bend). Take one minute for the first step: bring your attention to your body and mind at this present moment. What do you experience in your body? Is there tension, tightness or ease somewhere in your body? What thoughts or emotions are present right now? (Make sure that you also notice the positive emotions!) Take another minute for the second step: bring your attention towards your breathing. You don't need to judge or change anything in the way you breathe, just become aware of the breathing *as it is* and follow the breath: in, out and perhaps the pause in between two breaths. Finally, take the last minute for the third step: widen your focus to your body as a whole, breathing and standing/sitting in this moment. Can you feel the underground your body is sitting or standing on? What can you feel on your skin? Widen your focus again and become aware of sounds around you, of the space you are in, of other people or beings there. Breath deep in and out... and get back to whatever you were doing.

NOTE: If you notice your mind is wandering, no problem. Just notice that it was distracted (this is what minds do) and bring your focus back in a kind and non-judging way.

INNER SAFE SPACE

WHY: Strictly seen, this is not a mindfulness exercise. Mindfulness emphasizes on awareness in the here and now – this exercise deliberately visualizes a place which is not in the here and now. Sometimes, the present moment can be too stressful to handle. When the 'outside' is not safe enough, we can turn towards an 'inner place' where we feel safe and calm – helping us to navigate through the moment while avoiding panic attacks or other forms of emotional crises. The more we visualize this space in detail, the more we can get absorbed by it and calm down. The advantage of an 'inner safe space' is that we carry it with us, in ourselves, and that we can call on it whenever we need it.

WHEN: The 'inner safe space' exercise can be done (or offered to a person) when 'being in the present moment' is too hard, when a panic attack is imminent or when someone is too agitated to handle other forms of support.

HOW: The audio file with the 'inner safe space' exercise can be downloaded here: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/zoomqesbhoxfsgh/inner%20safe%20space.mp3?dl=0>. When using it in a Support & Recovery context, it is best to have the audio file on a mp3 player and to have a headset at disposition. Make sure the exercise is done in a (physical) safe space, away from any visual or auditive input that might add to the stress.

Instead of using the audio file, you can also read the following text to the other person (or, even better, get familiarized with the exercise and learn the text by heart). When reading out loud the text to someone, make sure to read it in a slow pace and to incorporate moments of silence, so that the other person has the time to visualize the place.

Your inner safe space

Take an alert and comfortable position. Your back is upright, your shoulders are relaxed. First, direct your attention towards the places where your body touches the ground or chair. Feet, legs, bottom. Let your hands softly rest on your legs or in your lap.

Now close your eyes. Take your attention to the area of the forehead, the eyebrows and the eyes. Let it soften, as if it melts. Breathe in kindly and with every outbreath, let some of the tension melt away from the forehead, the eyebrows, the eyes.

Then, bring your attention to your breathing. You don't need to change anything in your breathing. It is just fine the way it is. Let your breathe come and go, in your own rythm, in your own way. Just follow the air as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Follow the rising and falling of your abdomen and chest. Breathe comes, breathe goes.

Now envision in your mind a place where you feel safe. This might be a place you know very well, or a place you remember from the past, somewhere where you feel safe and comfortable. Perhaps someone is with you, perhaps you're all by yourself.

It might be that you think of several places and that it is hard to choose one. That's okay. Then don't choose, let them all be there.

It might also be that you cannot think of a safe place. That's no problem, just make up a safe space of your own. It could be out in a forest, on the top of a mountain, on a quiet beach, whatever is fine for you.

Where do you feel safe, secure, at ease?

Merge into your safe place and use all of your senses to do so.

In your mind, take a look around. What can you see? What time of the day is it? Is it a light place or is it rather gloaming, with dimmed light? Is it a place with calm colours or is it very bright and colourful? Which colours can you see and can you notice the different shades of colours?

Sit quietly and listen. What different sounds belong to this place?

Let the image of this safe space become more and more real. Be there. If it is a place outside, feel the soft breeze through your hair, the warmth of the sun on your skin. Be aware of the underground you are sitting on. It might be a meadow, sand, a big rock in the sun. Feel the underground, it's texture, it's temperature. Take a deep breath and become aware of the smells of this place.

But most of all, take your time to enjoy this feeling. It is safe, secure. You are at ease. There is no need to do, say or think anything. Just sit here, be here. It is allright as it is.

Eyes closed, take another good look around so that you can remember this place. Take a few deep breaths and kindly bring back your attention to the here and now.

If you encounter any difficult moments today, if you realize that tension is building up or that you feel uncomfortable about something, then take a few moments for yourself.

Bring your attention to your breathing and see if you can return to this inner safe space. No one can touch or alter it; it is safely tucked away inside your mind.

When you feel ready for it, breath in and out deeply and slowly open your eyes, stretch or move a bit and then close this exercise at your own pace.

NOTE: People who are vulnerable for stress benefit most of this exercise when it is done on a regular basis during calm times, so that the person can recall the 'inner safe space' during stressful moments when the audio file is not within reach. The more often it is performed, the more detailed the 'inner safe space' will be (and therefore the effect will be more calming and stabilizing).

IMPORTANT: 'Avoidance' is one of the three reaction types to stress and the 'inner safe space' exercise might reinforce the avoidance reaction. Make sure the exercise is used wisely and well-dosed... don't use it as an escape by doing it too often.

HERE AND NOW WITH ALL SENSES

WHY: This exercise is actually the opposite of the previous exercise. This time, the senses are used to firmly bring back a person to the here and now.

WHEN: The exercise can be used when a person is in acute distress, such as a panic attack or when someone is showing signs of dissociation.

HOW: Work your way through the senses (vision, hearing, smell, touch, temperature, taste) by asking questions that concern the *direct surroundings*. Asking 'what do you see?' might be too much; it is better to ask simple yes or no questions (preferably yes) such as 'can you see something red (blue, whatever color)?' or 'can you hear the sound of a car passing by (or a bird singing)?'. A person can answer out loud (enabling you to monitor the mental process) or answer mentally in silence (enabling the calming effect of silence to do its work).

VERY IMPORTANT: This exercise should only be done in a setting that is away from the action site (or any stress-related location), that is 100% safe and where there is absolutely no visual, auditive or other input that might add to the stress or fear.

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

WHY: Breathing techniques can be used to calm down the stressed or agitated mind, but can also be used to manage physical pain or discomfort. By focusing on the breath, the attention is taken away from the stressful input and the mind realizes that there is more than just the pain or the discomfort. The rhythm of the breath is calming and grounding.

WHEN: Breathing techniques can be used during moments of mental stress or moments that involve physical pain. For example, when a cutting team is working on a lock-on or when a sit-in is pulled apart by the police. You can even use breathing techniques when you need to pee, but can't (for example when you are in a lock-on or part of a road blockade).

HOW: There are many breathing techniques. In this reader we provide five techniques.

Mindful breathing

Simply follow the breath as it is. There is no need to change the breathing, just be curious, open-minded and non-judgmental on experiencing the breath, as it presents itself. Follow the whole breath: the in breath, the out breath and the eventual pauses in between two breaths. Notice where in the body the breath is experienced and in what ways. If you notice your mind is wandering, no problem. Just notice that it was distracted (this is what minds do) and bring your focus back in a kind way. For some people, it is helpful to (mentally) say 'in' during the in breath and 'out' during the out breath, or to count at the end of every breath (count up until 10 and then start again at 1. When you loose count, no problem, just start at 1 again).

Shifting the focus during mindful breathing

Follow the breath as described in the mindful breathing exercise. When the mind is dull or tired, it helps to focus specifically on the sensations of the in breath in the upper part of the body or in the head. You could visualize the breath as incoming light that spreads in your head (if visualizations work for you). On the other hand, if the mind is agitated or chatty, focus more on experiences of the out breath and the lower parts of the body, specifically the body parts that touch the underground (feet when standing, buttocks and feet when sitting, heels/calves/buttocks/back/hands/back of the head when lying down). Imagine breathing in from the ground and breathing out into the ground.

Birth breathing

Birth breathing techniques have been used for thousands of years to manage the pain during labour in a natural way. But they can be used to manage any kind of pain! The most common one uses this rhythm: (deep in breath) – (several out breaths: short – short – short – short – short – short – long until no breath is left). But as long as the emphasis lies on the out breath, any rhythm will work. Another birth breathing technique is the 'butterfly': rapid shallow in and out breaths, followed by several deep breaths when the pain starts to fade away. Just don't do this too long, as you might risk to start hyperventilating.

Systema breathing

Systema, a form of martial arts that originated in Russia, uses a focus on the out breath during pain: speeding up or slowing down according to the amount of pain that is experienced, with a loud HUH on every out breath. It might feel a bit awkward in the beginning to make so much noise while breathing, but it is an excellent technique.

NOTE: Breathing techniques to manage stress or pain work best when they are combined with muscle relaxation at the same time. So while breathing, mentally scan the body for any tensions and let go of these tensions on an out breath.

MASSAGE TECHNIQUES WITHOUT DIRECT TOUCHING

BALL

WHY: Instead of using your hands, you can also use a (clean) tennis ball to massage shoulders and back. Using a ball will ensure a constant pressure that is not too weak nor too strong.



WHEN: Use a ball when you're not really sure about your own massage skills or if you frequently hear that you're doing it too soft or too strong. As you are not touching the person directly, this is also a good technique for people for whom it is difficult to be touched directly (e.g. after physical violence, abuse or who are experiencing trust issues).

HOW: Stand behind a person who sits. Roll the ball in small circles over shoulders, neck and upper back (the area of the Trapezius muscle). Be careful not to touch parts where the bones are right under the surface of the skin, such as the skull, shoulder blades, shoulder joints or spine, as this might be painful.

REBOZO

WHY: The rebozo is a cloth that originates from Latin America and is used for many purposes (carrying stuff or babies, keeping warm, clothing, sitting cloth) but also for massage purposes. Rebozo massaging is very soothing and relaxing and the great advantage is that you don't need to touch someone directly.

WHEN: use the rebozo technique with people who are obviously stressed or feeling unsafe (make sure you are in a quiet and safe space!). Using the rebozo is excellent for people for whom it is difficult to be touched directly.

HOW: Unfold and put down the rebozo (or any other cloth that is big and strong enough) halfway the mat. Ask the person to lie down on the mat, on the back, positioned in such a way that the rebozo goes from the upper thighs to the lower back. Pick up the two sides of the rebozo and wrap them firmly around your hands, while standing with your feet next to each hip of the person lying down. Slowly lift the lower back and hips of the person by pulling the rebozo upwards and gently rock the hips from one side to another. Use your own creativity in how to rock, but always do it slowly and at ease. In a very very slow way, lower the rebozo until back of the person is fully down on the ground again. You can repeat this a couple of times.



Remove the rebozo (or use a second one) and put it under the head of the person. Slowly lift, slowly rock and very very slowly put the head down again. Then fold the rebozo over the eyes (leave nose and mouth free for breathing) and let the person relax for a couple of minutes.

NOTE: The lower back and hips massage might put quite some strain on the back of the person who is giving the massage. Remember to keep your own back straight and the knees bend and lift from your legs, not your back or arms (so don't do it as the person on the black and white photo above!).