**Coping Skills Template**

Going through the family law process can be incredibly stressful. In addition to the past trauma you are trying to heal from, you are now navigating new systems and may be dealing with ongoing abuse tactics, in addition to your usual day-to-day demands. If you have children, you may be dealing with all of the impacts of this situation on them.

It is important to take care of yourself for a number of reasons. Good self-care will help you to make good choices for yourself, cope with the family law system, focus, and to take care of others effectively. Taking care of yourself is often easier said than done.

This handout has some examples of simple coping skills you can incorporate into your day. They can be used to ground you after an upsetting experience, to manage daily anxieties, or to help you gain a sense of calm in the midst of chaotic experiences.
If you have children, you also can teach these skills to them. Practice together and help your children to use these skills to calm themselves when upset.

*I see him in court and here it comes: the sweaty palms, the rapid heartbeat, the twitching of my legs, and now I feel like I'm going to vomit...This was me before I was introduced to coping skills.*

*After 4 months of developing coping techniques that worked for me, I see him again in court. Enter my coping strategy: deep breaths and 'square breathing.' I am also holding a folded up piece of paper. I close my eyes and see the picture that my children drew that I am now fiddling busily with my fingers.*

*I am calm, much more at peace, and I no longer feel the urge to run to the bathroom. I can do this. I will do this. And I did.*

*It did not happen overnight; it takes time, practice and a commitment to self-care.*

- A domestic violence survivor

Different techniques work well for different people. If one is not a good fit for you, try another or try a combination of techniques. The most difficult time to try one of these exercises is when you are really stressed or anxious.

These techniques are most helpful if you try practicing them when you are feeling relatively good and then it will be easier to use them when you are feeling anxious. The more you practice these techniques, the easier they will become. It is like building muscle or learning to ride a bike.

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You can learn about ongoing treatment options and crisis help lines by insert a link to info about local mental health treatment resources.

**Breathing from the Belly**

You may have been told in the past to “take deep breaths” when you are upset. You may have even tried it and felt that it was not useful. Breathing is a very useful way to help bring your mood down from an escalated state, but only when it is done correctly. When we are upset, our breathing becomes quicker and more shallow, which does not provide the relaxing effect.

Try the following type of breathing and see how it changes the way you feel in a moment.

1. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your belly.
2. Inhale through your nose and focus on causing the hand on your belly to move more than the hand on your chest.
3. Try to count slowly to 5 as you breathe.
4. Now push the air out of your belly through your mouth as you exhale slowly and count to 5.
5. Imagine your breath as a continuous movement in and out of your body, using imagery of a river, energy, or light flowing into and out of your body.

**Change the Channel**

This skill is used when you are having intrusive thoughts such as anxieties about what may happen or intrusive experiences such as flashbacks to past trauma. First, you must practice when you are in a calm space. This allows you to call up these images more easily when you are in a more escalated state.

1. Practice visualizing a TV and imagine you have a remote control in your hand.
2. Picture the details of the screen (is it a big screen? what color is it?) and where the controls are on the remote (which buttons do you press for volume and changing channels?).
3. Now imagine you are watching your favorite comedy show in that TV screen.
4. While you are watching, practice changing the channels to view different comedy shows.
5. When you are having intrusive thoughts or experiences, picture your intrusive thoughts inside of that same TV screen.
6. Now that it is just another channel on the TV screen in your mind, change the channel to your favorite comedy show, just as you did when you were practicing.

**Daily Think Time**

Allow for a daily time to think. The long-term strategy for reducing intrusive thoughts (repetitive negative thoughts) and experiences (for example, flashbacks) is to provide structure and support to your mind in its quest to process the memories.



The best way to do this on your own time is to make an appointment with yourself for a specific time each day that you will allow your mind to do this thinking work. Start small with the time. Even 5 minutes can feel overwhelming when you are starting. Slowly build your way up to 20 minutes or a half an hour. If the thoughts feel too overwhelming to think about on your own, this is a great activity to do with an advocate, counselor, therapist, or trusted friend or family member.

Do this thinking early in the day and set up a series of [Thought Stopping](#ThoughtStopping) (see instructions) and [Distracting Activities](#DistractingActivities) (see list) to get your mind off the thoughts after your daily think time is over. It can also help to write down the thoughts causing you distress throughout the rest of the day. Tell yourself, “I will think about this during my daily think time tomorrow.” By writing it down you reassure yourself that you will remember it at the appropriate time, and release yourself from needing to think about it at that moment.

**Distracting Activities**

Here is a list of activities you can choose to do to distract yourself. Everyone is different, so some of these may turn out to be frustrating or triggering for you. If one is not effective, try another. You can decide which of these will be most useful for you!

Take a walk

Read a book

Cook

Watch TV or a movie

Listen to music

Spend time with friends

Take a shopping trip

Go to the gym

Play with your pet

Organize something

Make a “To-Do” list

Look through a magazine

Play sports

Pay the bills

Dance

Call someone to talk

Do some gardening

Go to a museum

Do Mad Libs

Write fiction or poetry

Take a hot shower or bath

Do a crossword puzzle or Sudoku

Spend time / Play with your children\*

Play a card game (you can play several versions of solitaire)

Counting (e.g., # of books you have, dogs you see outside)

Do chores around the house (vacuum, dishes, scrubbing)

Do math (e.g., count backwards by 7s starting at 198)

Play computer/video games (Tetris is especially good at distracting)

Make a “Top 10” list (e.g., favorite movies, places to travel)

Look at videos online (e.g., funny cats, TED talks)

Work on a craft project (crochet, paint, draw, scrapbook)

Use a stress-reducing app\*\*

**\***Ideas for free activities that you can do with your children are available at [www.netmums.com/activities/free-family-fun/free-family-fun-creative-ideas](http://www.netmums.com/activities/free-family-fun/free-family-fun-creative-ideas).

\*\*Examples of stress-reducing apps include:

Self-Help for Anxiety Management app (free): <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/self-help-for-anxiety-management/id666767947?mt=8>

Calm (free option available) - <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/calm-meditate-sleep-relax/id571800810?mt=8>

**Exercise**

Exercise helps to reduce stress and improve mood. It can take your mind off your stressors, release chemicals that make you feel better, and boost your confidence. Research even suggests that exercise can reduce depression as much as psychiatric medications. You do not have to go running or lift weights to get these positive benefits—anything that gets your body moving counts. You can take a short walk, do chores around the house, play with your children, or take the stairs instead of the elevator. “Mind-body” exercises like yoga, Pilates, and tai chi can be especially effective because they incorporate relaxation and mindfulness as well as physical movement.

The insert the name of your local YMCA or another resource for this if one exists in your area offers scholarships for memberships that enable people with low incomes to access their programs including their gyms, pools, and exercise classes. Learn more at insert the website for your resource. Your local community center is also a good place to check for fitness activities that are free or available through scholarships.

**Grounding**

When you are feeling overwhelmed by distressing thoughts or emotions, grounding can help to redirect your attention to the current external world. At times when you are unable to stop negative thoughts and feelings and want to focus, you can use this technique to help you come back to the present moment.

1. First, describe one thing that you see in front of you. What is it called? What does it look like? What color is it? What is its size? Be detailed!
2. Next, describe one thing you can hear. Is it loud or quiet? High or low pitched? Pleasant or annoying?
3. Finally, describe one thing you can touch. Is it hot or cold? Smooth or rough? Wet or dry?
4. Go around again and describe two things; then three things; finally, four things.

By this time, your attention will probably be re-focused on the here and now.

Notice if your breathing has slowed down, if your muscles are less tense and so on.

**Grounding Using an Item**

When we are caught up in our stressful thoughts and emotions, we are pulled out of the here and now. This can interfere with our ability to function in situations that require our attention or to go about our daily activities.

Grounding Using an Item is another skill to help bring your attention and emotions into the present moment. Find an item that is small and can fit into your hand or pocket. This can be something as simple as a paperclip or a small stone. It may be something more meaningful to you, such as a religious item, something handmade, or something that reminds you of a happier time. It may also be something with a quality that you find grounding, such as a smooth or rough texture, or a particular fragrance (such as lavender) that you find calming. Keep this item with you in your pocket.

When you start to be triggered by something or to feel stressed out, put the object in your hand. Squeeze it, roll it over, smell it, look at it, and turn your thoughts to this object. Think of the positive meaning associated with this object and experience the physical attributes that you find calming.

A grounding object can be especially useful in settings such as court, when the other techniques listed in this handout may not be as accessible.

**Music**

Music is an effective way to distract yourself and to improve your mood. Music has been shown to decrease anxiety and depression. It also decreases the level of cortisol, a stress hormone in your body. Music can be motivational, driving you forward when you feel like giving up. It can be very subjective, so pick songs to listen to that you notice help you feel more relaxed or motivated.

For a list of songs chosen specifically to help throughout this process, check out the [Songs for Surviving the Family Law System](http://endgv.org/toolkits/family-law-toolkit-for-domestic-violence-survivors/) handout.

**Nutrition**

Eating foods that fuel your body with energy helps to keep your blood sugar, and therefore your mood and attention, consistent throughout the day. Some foods may make your negative feelings worse. It is important to eat at regular intervals and to have a healthy balance of nutrients in your diet. It may even be necessary to take additional vitamins or supplements. Speak with your doctor for individualized recommendations about the best food and nutrition plan for you.

For more information about healthy nutrition, check out [www.choosemyplate.gov/](http://www.choosemyplate.gov/).

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

In this exercise, you will be tensing and relaxing different muscle groups one by one. Be conscious of the needs of your body and do not do anything that might hurt you.

While doing this exercise, you may experience a sense of calm, and may be more aware of your body. You may also notice that it is very difficult to think about what is causing you stress. If you struggle with falling asleep, this is a great exercise to do right before going to bed, as it cues your body and mind that it is time to relax.

1. Get comfortable in a chair and close your eyes, if you feel comfortable.
2. Begin with your hands and arms. While taking in a slow deep breath, clench your fists and tighten your arms. Hold 5 seconds and relax as you exhale slowly.
3. Do this twice more.
4. Place your hands behind your head. As you take in a slow, deep breath, gently push your head back and your hands forward. Hold 5 seconds. Now release and drop your hands to your side as you breathe out slowly.
5. Repeat 2 more times.
6. Now tighten the muscles of your face as you draw in a slow, deep breath. Hold this position, and notice the tension in your forehead, jaw and eyes. Hold 5 seconds. Release and breathe out slowly.
7. Repeat 2 more times.
8. Tighten the muscles in your legs by lifting your feet off the ground when you inhale. Pull your toes towards your body, notice the tension in your calves and thighs. Hold 5 seconds and release your legs to the floor as you breathe out.
9. Repeat 2 more times.
10. Count to 3 and open your eyes slowly.

**Square Breathing**

Regulating your breath can be a simple and effective way to reduce your anxiety immediately. Square breathing is a specific type of breathing that helps you to regain control over your breathing patterns and helps calm your mind and body. In this technique, you breathe consciously in four-second increments as you take your gaze clockwise around a square. This may not be a good technique for you if holding your breath causes you anxiety.



1. Picture a square or look at a square item (such as a post-it note).
2. Take a deep breath in as you count 1…2…3…4… and take your gaze from left to right along the top edge of the square.
3. Hold your breath as you count 1...2…3…4… and take your gaze from top to bottom along the right edge of the square.
4. Exhale as you count 1…2…3…4… and take your gaze from right to left along the bottom edge of the square.
5. Rest for 1…2…3…4… and take your gaze from bottom to top along the left edge of the square.
6. Repeat this process as many times as you need to.

**Staring Down the Monster**

Sometimes our distress comes from our reactions to our own thoughts and feelings. We become afraid or anxious about things that we cannot control. This technique helps you to accept when thoughts and feelings are present without fighting them or trying to rid yourself of them. You may find that they do not have as much power as they seemed when you are fighting them.

To do this, you simply sit and notice what the thoughts and feelings are. You do not have to do anything else. Just keep reminding yourself you just need to notice thoughts and feelings; you do not need to do anything about them. Tell yourself: “I can observe these thoughts and feelings. I can tolerate them. I don’t have to do anything about them.” This can be paired with [Daily Think Time](#DailyThinkTime).

As you are experiencing anxiety, you can use this technique until you feel calmer. If this does not help, you may want to try one of the other exercises.

**Thought Stopping**

Thought Stopping is a way of shouting over anxiety provoking, intrusive thoughts. When using this technique, you do your best to shout over these thoughts by shouting, “stop!” You can do this either out loud (if you are by yourself) or internally to yourself. Picture a stop sign, a car putting on the brakes, or a hand coming up to block the thought.

It can be helpful to engage in a [Distracting Activity](#DistractingActivities) (see list) after doing Thought Stopping, so the thought does not come right back.

This tool was adapted from the Domestic Violence and Mental Health

Collaboration Project’s Family Law Toolkit for Survivors.

The original version of this tool can be found at

<http://endgv.org/toolkits/family-law-toolkit-for-domestic-violence-survivors/>.

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