Mindfulness Moments to Soothe and Support

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Life as a student often involves juggling numerous competing demands. These may include deadlines of assessment due dates, finding time to concentrate and study to support the learning of course material, preparing presentations, working on group projects and all this alongside personal and family commitments outside TAFE. Students often report they feel their ‘stress bucket’ is full to overflowing at times. How can we nurture ourselves to reduce the sense of pressure that can emerge when we feel overwhelmed?

Let’s first recall how the human brain is wired and what happens when stress levels mount. The stress response in our nervous system is referred to as the fight or flight response. When the fight or flight response is activated our brain signals the body to ready itself for immediate, urgent action – helpful if we need to run or physically defend ourselves from a threat but not so helpful if we need to focus on study tasks. Increased heart rate, pumping more blood to your arms and legs in case you need to fight or flee can feel uncomfortable and make it more difficult to concentrate and think calmly.

So how can we care for ourselves at these times when our brain is sending messages that we are under threat?

1. Recognise
   The first step is to simply recognise that the stress response has been activated in the brain. The first signal of this may be an awareness of increased heart rate or a sense of pressure or rushing, urgency, or possibly thoughts and preoccupations about an unwanted or feared event, task or situation.

   Taking a moment to say to ourselves, aha, my stress response has been activated will allow us to...

2. Pause
   Once we have recognised the stress response is activated we can make the intention to pause and turn our attention inwards to give ourselves the care and compassion that will allow for calming and soothing ourselves.

   We might say to ourselves, ok, time to stop, pause and give myself some care. This may be accompanied by a small gesture of self-support such as a gentle hand placed on the heart, belly or forehead. In this way we signal to our bodies the intention to nurture ourselves and engage in self-care.

3. Choose an act of self-soothing
   Here are some ideas for bringing acts of mindfulness and self-care into our everyday life.
Mindful Breath

Mindful breathing is a tool always at our disposal to slow the heart rate and activate the calming response in our brain. Sometimes it can be helpful to begin by taking a couple of active slow breaths where we count to focus our attention on slowing the breath, in for 3 slow counts through the nose and out for 4 slow counts through the mouth. Then we may place our attention on the natural rhythm of our breathing. See the free app, smiling mind for some guided breathing exercises to assist with this. The key is to adopt a regular mindfulness practise so that it becomes a habit. A goal of sitting with breath for 5 minutes each day can be a great way to start. The easy part is it can be done just about anywhere - on the bus or train on the way to TAFE or before bed, for example. Try the free Smiling Mind app, its free! [https://www.smilingmind.com.au/](https://www.smilingmind.com.au/)

Body stretching

Some simple, gentle stretches can support the body to let go of muscle contractions in the face, neck, shoulders, the typical tension ‘hot spots’ or anywhere else you may experience muscular stress reactions. A quick body scan where we sweep our focus from the top of our heads down to our toes will determine where body tightness may be lurking. It need not be a complicated yoga contortion, a simple flex or stretch can be enough to remind the muscle to let go.

Try these:

- Allow the muscles in the face to ‘melt’ and soften
- Bring a sense of letting go to the shoulders and arms
- Become aware of a posture of dignified, uprightness through the spine and neck whilst relaxing the limbs
- Take 30 seconds time out to self-massage the fingers, hands, neck, temples when working for long stretches at the computer

Mindful Walking

Perhaps you have just recognised a stress reaction while studying in the library. You feel ‘wound up’ and restless. Going for a 5-10 minute mindful walk where we put our focus on the body moving in a dignified yet relaxed posture may be the perfect self-soothe. It can help to scan the body while walking, noticing the position of the head, shoulders, swinging of the arms, and extension of the spine. In this way we may actively find the posture that best supports a sense of our body being held with care and support.
Mindful cup of tea

So often when we have our cuppa our mind is churning over the events of the day or what lies ahead, the pressing ‘to do’s’ of tomorrow, or our mind can jump from thought to thought, endlessly attaching itself to topics in what is sometimes referred to as ‘monkey mind’.

When we make the intention to have a mindful cup of tea we may immerse ourselves completely in the pleasure of drinking a cup of tea. From selecting a favourite mug, to warming the cup, preparing the tea with love and care, inhaling the aroma and taking full pleasure in the taste and sensation of each sip. Also choosing the perfect place to enjoy the experience, in the garden or on a comfy chair can bring our minds to a place of presence to enhance the pleasure of a humble cup of tea.

We can create mindful moments with any activity of our choice by opening our attention and allowing ourselves to be in the moment and more fully experiencing what we are doing. A bath, self-massage with body cream, listening to a beautiful piece of music with eyes closed, walking barefoot in the grass are some other deliciously sensory experiences for mindful enjoyment.

Further Assistance:

For further assistance around Mindful practise, get in touch with your local campus Counselling and Career Development Unit.