

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

- These techniques are not about solving current life issues – that requires time and headspace once you've tackled your immediate stress levels.
- Right now this is about getting you relief today with simple brain and body exercises. They're based on scientific research, as well as what my clients find works for them in practice.
- Pick and choose what works for you. Just do what you can manage – the more the better, but even a little will help.
- Each point spells out what you need to do in order to make the strategy work, as well as offering a hint about putting it into practice.

If you have any questions or concerns
you can email me here:

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#1 STOP AND RESET

Feeling in control is an antidote to stress—this mental exercise helps you stop stress in its tracks and regain control.

What you need to do

Turn your attention to your stress.

That is, stop what you're doing and assess your situation—is anyone at risk of dying or suffering dire consequences? Is the situation as catastrophic as your internal stress alarm wants you to believe?

Stress impacts your judgement (just as pain and alcohol do), so it may be wise to speak with a trusted friend or colleague to help with your assessment.

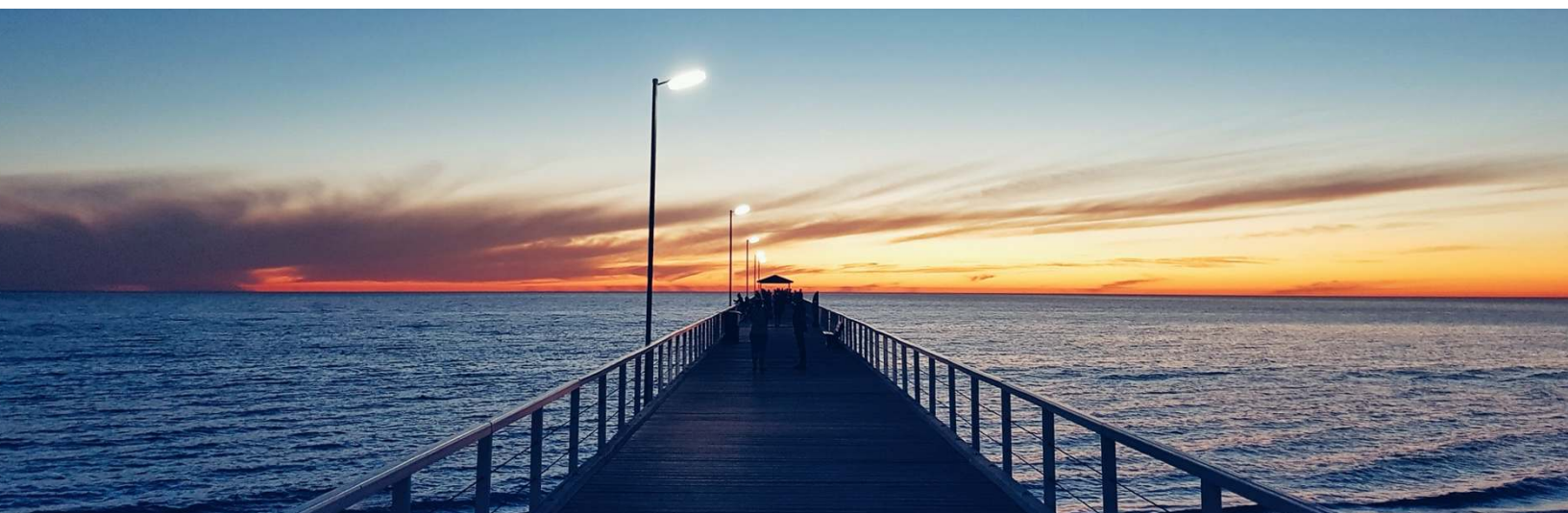
In all likelihood you'll find that the level of urgency or panic that you feel, is not warranted or helpful.

It may feel counterintuitive, but stopping is key; stop and reset your stress alarm.

HINT:

Your stress alarm will scream at you to go faster, to go harder, to panic. When you stop and look at your stress, you take back control. You stop your stress reaction from escalating, and you start recovering.

Return to this mental step whenever you feel out of control.



#2 CALM YOUR MIND AND BODY

Stress-relief exercises calm your mind and body—take a few minutes to choose and practice one that suits you.

What you need to do:

Practice one or more of the following five exercises. Choose whichever is easiest or most effective for you. Spend as little as a few minutes on your exercise. It will be most effective if you repeat it at regular intervals.

1. Relaxation breathing

Slow your breathing and lengthen your exhalation. Ensure it's your belly that expands when you inhale, and not your chest.

(See this [video](#) for more detail)

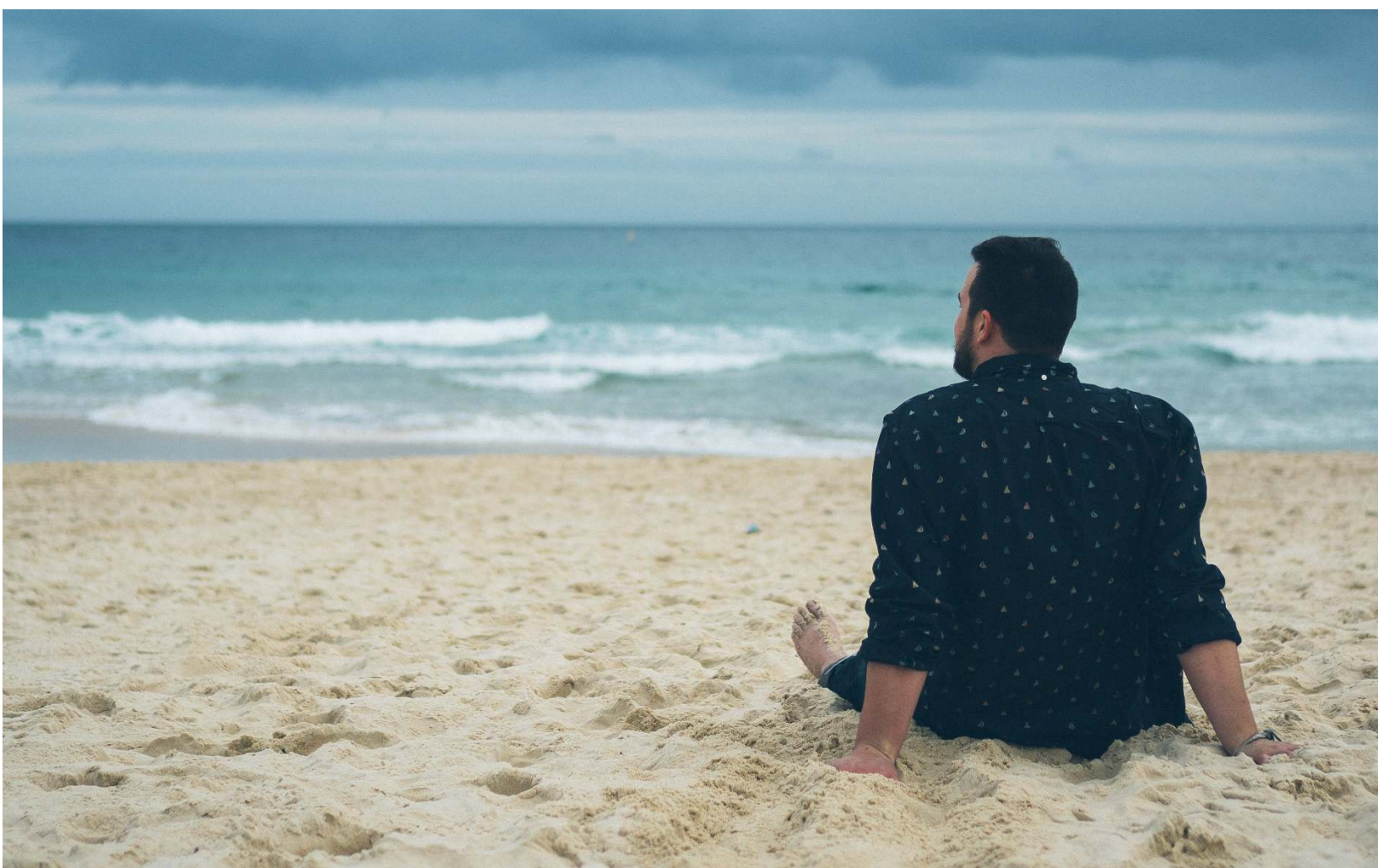


2. Sensory engagement

Close your eyes and tune in to whatever sensory data you can find:

- coolness or heat
- a surface or clothing against your skin
- tension in specific muscles
- the pressure of the chair on your back or the ground under your feet
- sounds that you can hear

(Again see the [video](#) for more detail)



3. Progressive muscle relaxation

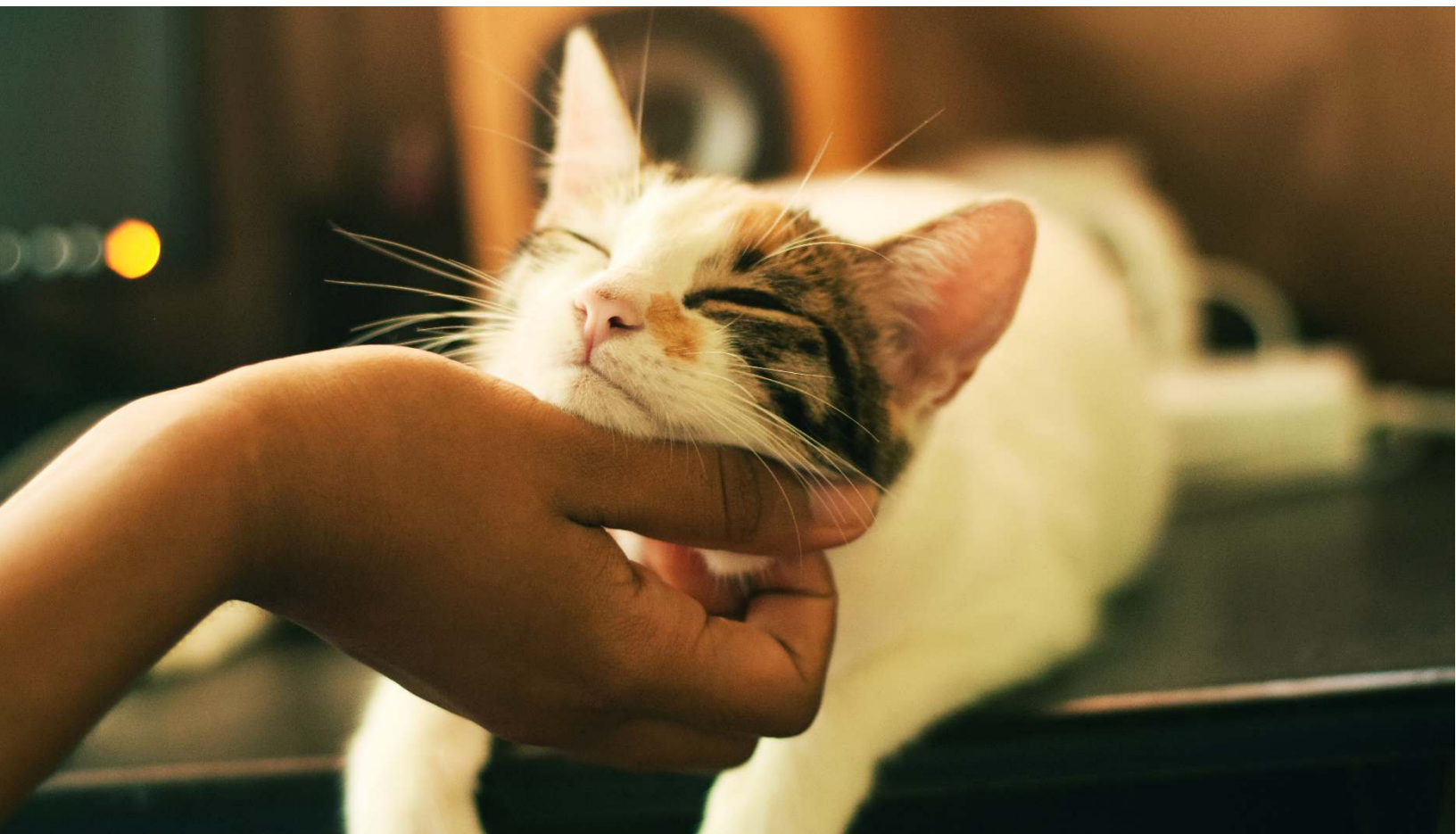
Slowly move through your body from head to toe, tensing and relaxing muscles or parts of your body as you go.

Squeeze, tighten or clench the muscles for a few seconds and then release for a few seconds. (You can listen to a 17-minute guided [PMR audio here](#) — this is especially helpful to do in the late evening, to help you with sleep.)

4. Touch

Take time out to touch, or be touched.

This can be stroking the cat, brushing your child's hair, or giving or receiving a back rub from your partner. Alternatively, get yourself a shoulder or scalp massage, or maybe get your hair washed.



5. Walk

Go for a walk around the block.

Focus on how it feels as you stride, as you lift and plant your feet, as you swing your arms, and as you breathe. Alternatively pay attention to the sights and sounds around you, or to some pleasant music from your earphones.

HINT

These activities may feel counterintuitive and difficult to do while your stress alarm is screaming at you to panic, hurry and be task-focussed. Nonetheless be determined to practice regularly and you will pull your brain and body back into line...into a calmer and more productive state.

You will also enable better stress recovery and sleep.



#3 PREPARE FOR STRESS TRAPS

Many common stress-related behaviours make matters worse—take steps to avoid falling into these traps.

What you need to do:

Identify any unhelpful “coping” behaviours you have, or might, fall prey to. Which of these do you do:

- use alcohol and sleeping tablets to unwind and get to sleep
- use caffeine and sugar to prop you up
- remain sedentary, fail to take breaks and stay up all hours
- get sucked into TV, gaming, social media and other time-sapping distractions

Determine one or two small ways to avoid your stress-induced, unhelpful behaviours. For example:

- set an hourly chime on your phone to remind yourself to take a break
- set some limits e.g. 1 coffee/beer a day
- keep light nutritious snacks handy: nuts, veggie sticks, fruit
- pre-commit to leaving work and getting to bed at a reasonable hour

HINT

Ignoring your stress and stress behaviours prolongs and worsens your situation. Today's stress leaks into, and feeds, tomorrow's.

When you are stressed you don't have a lot of willpower available to you. However, if you can be alert to your destructive stress habits, you can take small steps to counter them.



#4 APPLY MENTAL FIRST AID

Stress impacts how your brain functions—use these techniques to alleviate the strain.

What you need to do:

Choose one or more of the following three mental approaches to retaliate against the stress-related forces on your brain.

1. Switch from autopilot to manual

Operating in autopilot mode can often be helpful. In our over-stuffed lives it frees up a bit of headspace by carrying us from A to B then C, without having to concentrate too hard.

But when stress strikes be sure to switch to manual mode so that you can evaluate your day and take some pressure off. Maybe you would be better off just going from A to C today and ditching B altogether.

Look for meetings or commitments you can cancel or reschedule. Ask someone to help you out. Record a voicemail greeting to say that you're unavailable today.

HINT

Reset your plans for the day to reflect the bare minimum that you can get away with.

Channel that assertive friend or colleague whom you admire, and behave as they would: say “no” to things, delete non-essential items, and ask for assistance.

Pull back today so that you're in a better position sooner, to get ahead again.

2. Stop the overdrive in your head

Stress automatically throws you into survival mode. And it makes your head spin. You think and rethink, analyse and reanalyse. It's unproductive, will worsen your stress, and it can be dangerous.

Overthinking or ruminating can fuel anxiety and depression.

Tune in regularly to catch yourself. Check for negative, circular and dead-end thought loops masquerading as analytical problem-solving.

HINT

Make a pact not to try to look for answers or solutions today. Stress impairs your cognitive function and it gives you a negative bias, so it's best not to pay attention to your thoughts and views when you're stressed. Turn your attention instead to (i) stress reduction efforts and (ii) small practical steps to get you through the day.



3. Be kind to yourself

Self compassion is a powerful, and nowadays, well-researched tool.

You will be all too familiar with the nasty voice in your head that berates you, telling you you're not good enough, or some version of that. When you're stressed that voice is louder and nastier than usual.

Remind yourself of this fact frequently and call on self compassion to counter this stress reaction, and to help you recover.

HINT

Either channel a wise, warm friend and hear in your mind what they would say to you right now. Or imagine what you would say to someone you care about whose battling with stress like yours.

