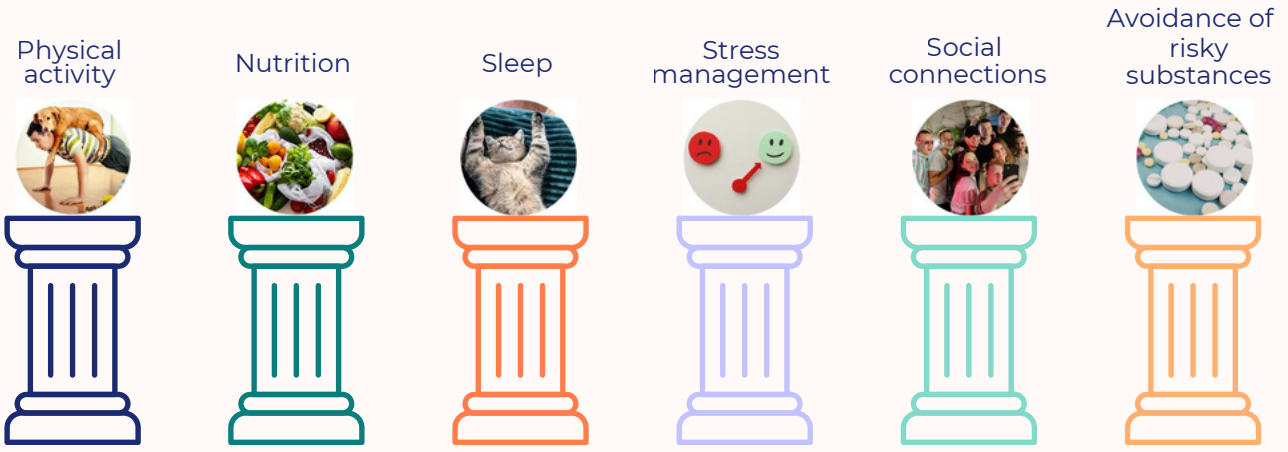
psychiatryUK

Living well with ADHD workbook





Six Lifestyle Pillars





Physical activity:
Aerobic exercise can improve brain function, which results in physiological changes, positively altering the brain structure.



Actions:

- Any movement, sitting or standing is good.
- Strength training too!
- Try to include exercises to improve balance.



Nutrition:
Evidence suggests that whole foods reduce the risk of depression whilst processed foods increase the risk. A healthy, balanced diet is key.



Actions:

- Limit or avoid sugary drinks.
- Limit or avoid processed foods.
- Eat vegetables, fruit, whole grains, nuts etc.



Sleep:
Establishing and maintaining a good sleep hygiene routine is key. Blue light can inhibit natural release of melatonin which supports good sleep.



Actions:

- Avoid salty foods before bed.
- Stay hydrated during the day.
- Increase daytime exposure to sunlight.



Stress

Acute stress activates adrenaline and cortisol which propels us into a fight, flight and freeze response. In turn, the risk of chronic stress increases.



Actions:

- Address underlying causes.
- Focus on Diet, nutrition, exercise etc.
- Try to get out in nature.



Social connections:

Loneliness increases morbidity and depression. Akin to smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Blood pressure and heart rates improve with social interactions.



Actions:

- Volunteer - connect with your community.
- Instigate more social meet-ups.
- Share new experiences.



Avoidance of risky substances:

Risky substances such as alcohol, nicotine, vaping and recreational drugs can have a significant impact on both physical and mental wellbeing.



Actions:

- Identify triggers, plan alternatives.
- Remove access within your environment.
- Seek early support.

Lifestyle changes can have a **profound** and **lasting impact** on both physical and emotional wellbeing. **Small adjustments** to sleep, movement, nutrition, stress management, relationships, and daily routines can **improve energy, mood, focus, confidence, and overall quality of life.**

The power of lifestyle medicine lies not in perfection, but in the cumulative effect of consistent, realistic choices made over time. **Small changes also help build self-efficacy** - you, ultimately, have control over your health and well being.

The goal is not to transform everything overnight, but to **identify what matters most** and take one meaningful step forward. Over time, these intentional choices create a **stronger foundation** for resilience, health and a life that feels more aligned, balanced and fulfilling.

Lifestyle Wheel

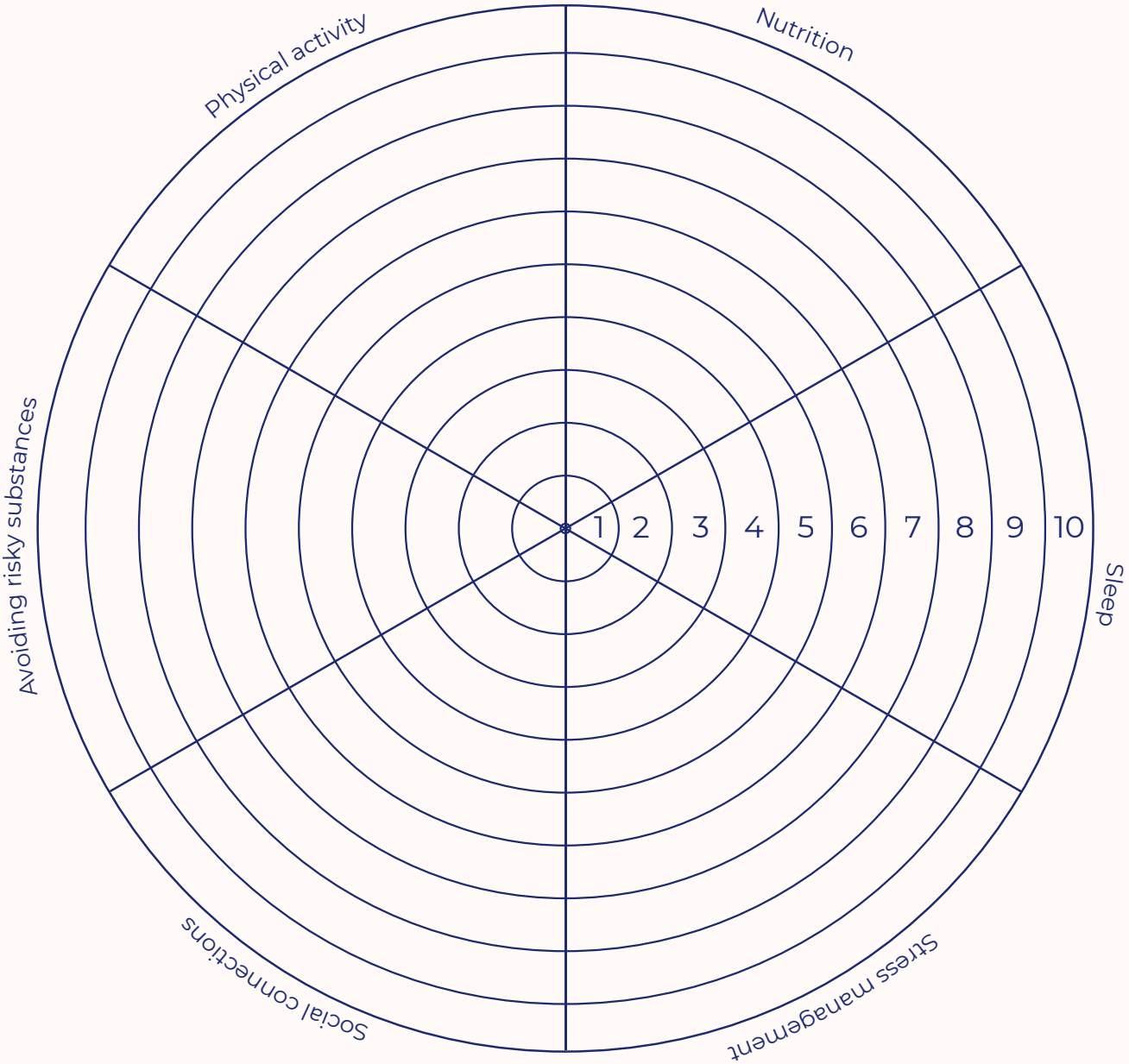
The Lifestyle Wheel is designed to help you pause, reflect and notice how satisfied you currently feel across different areas of your life. There are no right or wrong answers - this is simply a snapshot of where you are right now.

Shade in the areas in each section to indicate how satisfied you are.

For each section, give yourself a score from 1 to 10. Use this guide:

1 - 4 = very dissatisfied / needs urgent attention.
5 - 8 = okay but could be better.
9 - 10 = thriving and feels really positive.

Try to go with your first instinct rather than overthinking it.



Select the three lowest scoring areas and add them to your action plan, overleaf.

Lifestyle Wheel: action plan

The Lifestyle Wheel indicates that these are three areas I need to focus on:

My priorities: Which one of the top three is the biggest priority for you right now?

What can I influence and manage without support?

What can't I influence and manage?

You may need to acknowledge and accept that these may be outside of your own sphere of influence or support network.

Do I need help? Who can help me?

What I plan to do about it:

What would be the best outcome?

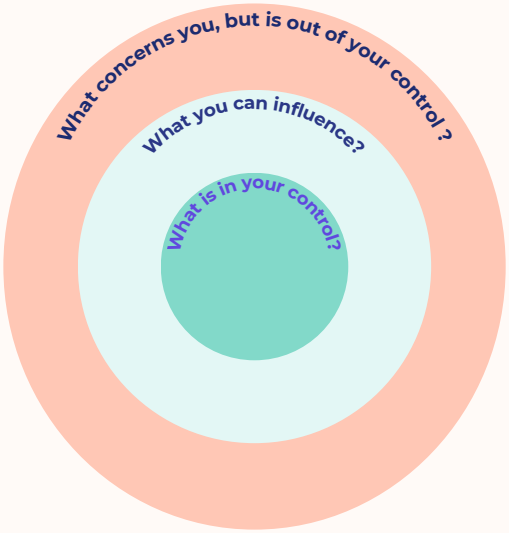
Circle of Control and Influence

Based on the Stephen Covey model

Circle of Control

The small circle in the middle represents the things you have direct control over. These are things like your own actions, thoughts and reactions.

For example; you can control how you choose to spend your time, how you react to situations and how you manage your own emotions.



Circle of Influence

Now, imagine a bigger circle surrounding the first one. This larger circle includes the things you can influence but not directly control.

These are things like your relationships with friends and family, your work or other environment, and the general mood of a group you're in.

You can't directly control these things, but you can still have some impact on them by communicating clearly, making suggestions or setting boundaries.

Circle of 'No' Control or Influence

Outside these two circles are things you cannot control or influence, like the weather, other people's decisions, or global events. It's important to recognise these things and try not to spend too much energy worrying about them, since they are beyond your control.

Adjust your focus

When you focus on what you can control, you can feel more empowered and less stressed.

This can be especially helpful for managing symptoms of ADHD, like impulsivity or difficulty focusing.

For example, instead of worrying about whether an assignment, you have submitted, will be good enough (something you can't control), you can focus on the next steps in your studies.

It will take practice, but the more you focus on your control areas the easier it will become.

Acknowledge the Circle of Influence

Understanding what you can influence helps you be proactive and communicate effectively.

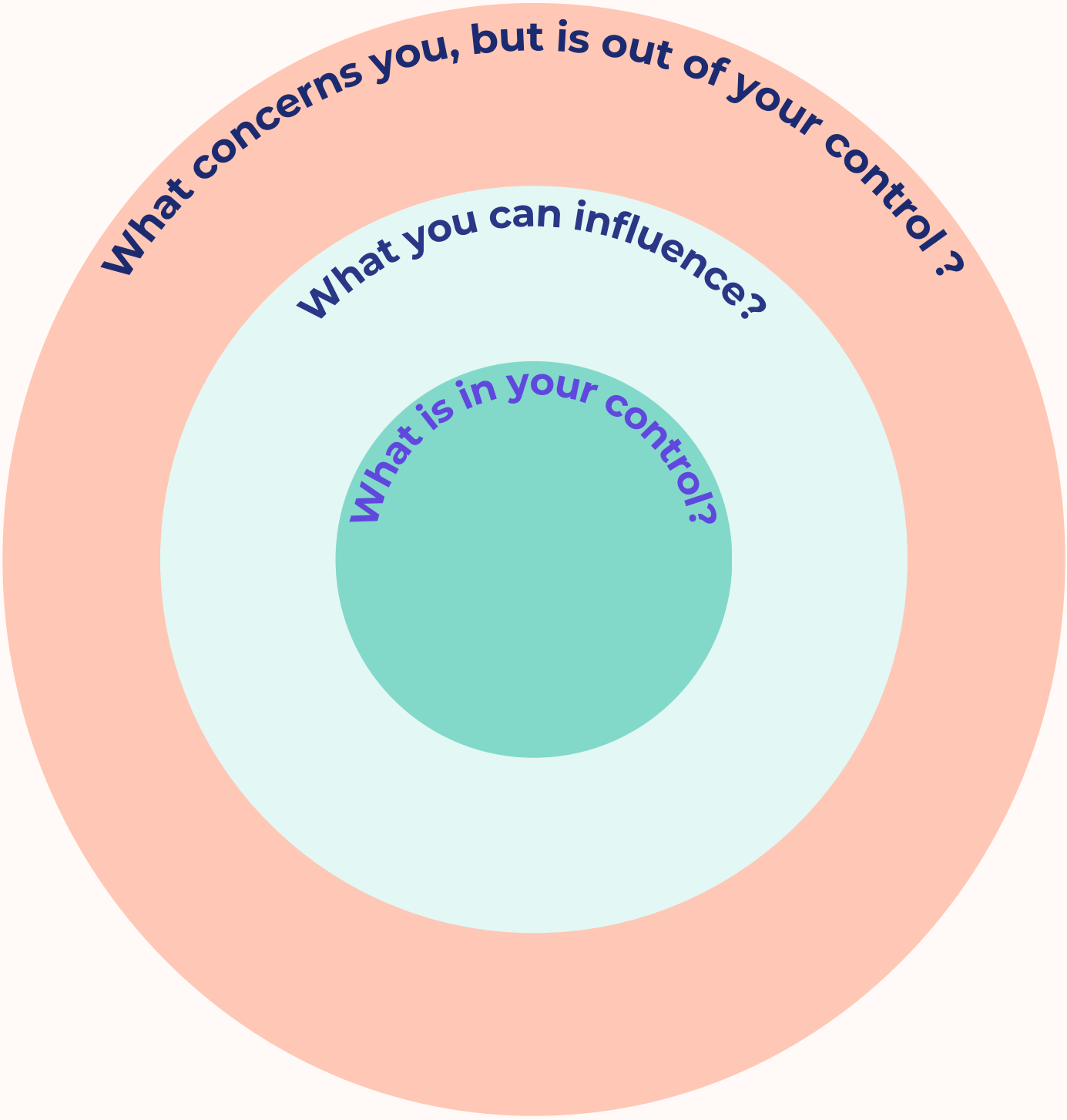
For instance, if a friend is upset, you can't control their feelings, but you can influence the situation by being supportive and listening.

Let go of the outside circle.

Accepting that some things are out of your control can help reduce anxiety and stress.

It allows you to let go of worries about other people's thoughts and opinions, how much traffic is on the road and many other factors which take up your precious time and energy.

Circle of Control and Influence



Adaptability



Adaptability is being able to adjust how we think, feel and act when situations change.

In everyday life this might look like shifting plans when something unexpected happens, finding a new way to approach a problem or learning from experience rather than getting stuck in frustration.

It allows us to stay open and curious instead of rigid, which can make challenges feel more manageable and less overwhelming.

When we practise being adaptable, we build confidence in our capacity to handle uncertainty because we know we can adjust our approach if needed.

In daily life, adaptability supports wellbeing and relationships. It helps us navigate busy schedules, changing priorities and the ups and downs that naturally come with work, family and personal goals.

Being able to pause, reassess and try a different strategy means we conserve energy and make decisions that better fit the moment.

Over time, this creates a sense of steadiness and self-trust, because we recognise that we can respond to what life brings rather than feeling thrown off course by it.



“You can’t stop the waves - but you can learn to surf!”

-Jon Kabat-Zinn-

Responding vs. Reacting

Responding instead of reacting is an important skill, especially for someone with ADHD, as it helps in managing impulsivity and emotional regulation.

What's the difference?

Reacting

Reacting to something is an automatic, quick response to a situation without much thought.

It often comes from an emotional place and can lead to actions that you might regret later. For example, snapping at a friend when you're upset.

Responding

This involves taking a moment to think before you act. It's a more thoughtful and considered way to handle a situation, allowing you to choose the best course of action.

For instance, pausing to consider your words before speaking.

Strategies

Take a deep breath

When you feel a strong emotion, like anger or frustration, take a deep breath before doing anything. This pause can help calm your mind and give you a moment to think.

Think about the outcome

Before reacting, ask yourself questions like: "Is this the best way to handle the situation?" or "How will this action affect others?" This can help you choose a more thoughtful response.

Identify your emotions

Take a moment to recognise and name the emotion you're feeling. Is it anger, frustration, excitement, or something else? Knowing what you're feeling can help you decide the best way to respond.

Have a plan!

Have a plan for situations that commonly trigger strong reactions in you. For example, if you often get frustrated with someone, decide in advance how you will respond calmly.

Be kind to yourself

Be kind to yourself when you make mistakes. Learning to respond instead of reacting is a process, and it's okay if you don't always get it right. The important thing is to keep trying and learning.

By practicing these strategies, you can develop the ability to respond thoughtfully to situations rather than reacting impulsively. This can help you build better relationships, manage your emotions, and feel more in control of your actions.

Reflect - metacognition!

Think about times when you reacted impulsively. What could you have done differently? Reflecting on these moments can help you learn and improve for the future and help support your metacognitive skills!

Did a situation occur today where you responded instead of reacting?

If you responded, what did you do and how did it make you feel?

If you reacted, reflect on what you could have done differently.

Automatic Negative Thoughts

From self-doubt to self-belief - here's how to silence negativity and build a mindset that lifts you up instead of holding you back!



What are Automatic Negative Thoughts?

Automatic Negative Thoughts, often shortened to ANTs, are quick, reflexive thoughts that pop into our minds without us choosing them. They tend to be critical, pessimistic or self-doubting and they often feel believable in the moment.

They are called automatic because they happen instantly, usually in response to a situation, memory or feeling. They are called negative because they often focus on what might go wrong, what we think we did wrong, or what we fear others might think of us.

Everyone experiences ANTs from time to time. They are a normal part of how the brain tries to predict and protect. However, when they happen frequently or go unchallenged, they can affect mood, confidence, behaviour and wellbeing.

Why do we have Automatic Negative Thoughts?

Our brains are wired to look for potential problems. This is an ancient survival mechanism designed to keep us safe.

Spotting danger quickly helped our ancestors respond to threats and today that same system can misfire in everyday situations.

ANTs can be more common when we are:

- Stressed or overwhelmed.
- Tired or run down.
- Experiencing anxiety or low mood.
- Going through change or uncertainty.
- Highly self-critical or perfectionistic.

Challenging Automatic Negative Thoughts?

The goal is not to stop thoughts completely. Instead, it is about creating space between the thought and your reaction.

1. Notice the thought

- Name it: "That's an automatic thought."

2. Check the evidence - Ask yourself:

- What facts support this?
- What facts don't?

3. Consider alternative perspectives

- What would you say to a friend in this situation?

4. Reframe with balance

- Create a more realistic thought, for example:
- "I made a mistake, but I can learn from it."

Automatic Negative Thoughts

Strategies to manage the ANTS!

1

Reframe-it Challenge

Take a negative thought and write it down. Then, challenge yourself to ‘reframe’ it by turning it into a positive or more realistic statement.



2

Positive Affirmations Jar

Write down positive affirmations or compliments about yourself on slips of paper. Whenever you notice negative self-talk, pull out an affirmation from the jar to counter it.



3

Daily Success Log

Keep a log of your daily accomplishments, no matter how small. Reviewing this list during moments of doubt can help you recognise your progress and strengths.



4

Create a Self-Talk Switch

Create a small visual reminder like a bracelet or ring you can wear. When you catch yourself engaging in negative self-talk, physically ‘switch’ the reminder to your other hand as a cue to change your thinking.



5

‘Say it to a Friend’ Approach

Practice asking yourself, ‘Would I say this to a friend?’ If the answer is no, then it's a reminder to change your self-talk to something kinder and more supportive.



6

Turn it into a character

Imagine your negative self-talk as a character, like a villain in a story. This can help you detach from the thoughts and see them as external rather than internal.



Guided Transitional Pauses

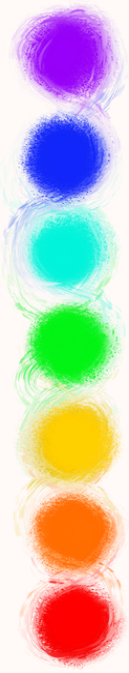
Guided Transitional Pauses can be short or long - depending on what time you have. It takes 90 seconds, or more, if you have the time. Stand if possible. If seated, ensure both feet are flat on the floor. The space does not have to be silent.

Close your eyes, relax your jaw, release your tongue from the roof of your mouth, part your lips slightly and **ARRIVE**.

A **Acknowledge** the weather pattern of your mind – how you are feeling in this moment, no criticism or judgement of what this feeling is, just recognition and acknowledgement. **PAUSE**.

R **Root**, your feet firmly into the ground

R **Remember to BREATHE**. Start to take note of your breathing – don't alter it at all, just acknowledge and be aware – are you breathing fast? Slow? Deeply? Shallow? Are you breathing from your belly? Your ribs? Your throat? NOW start to take a deep breath in and exhale deeply.



Start to imagine your INHALE starting at your belly button, imagine a colour, maybe your favourite colour as a ball at your belly button.

As you inhale, that ball of colour slowly travels up from your belly button, through the centre of your body, through your chest, your throat, your forehead to the top of your head.

Once It reaches here, it blends and mixes into a different colour ball – this is your exhale.

As you exhale, imagine this new coloured ball, travelling down slowly back through your forehead, throat, chest and to your belly button.

Continue to blend and mix colours with every inhale and every exhale, keep the breath slow.

I **Intention.** Once you feel you want to stop, or have to stop, start to allow your breathing to go back to normal. Set an intention for your next task, job, or place this can be a big or small intentions (the smaller the better!) before you open your eyes.

V **Visualise** your feet firmly into the ground

E **Enter** that new fresh space with your eyes open.

Meditation and Mindfulness

Reduces Anxiety and Stress:
Helps lower stress levels and promotes a sense of calm.

Promotes Better Sleep:
Contributes to more restful and restorative sleep.

Improves Focus and Concentration:
Enhances your ability to stay focused on tasks.

Boosts Emotional Well-being:
Helps manage mood swings and emotional instability.

Decreases Physical Tension:
Alleviates muscle tension and physical discomfort.

Enhances emotional regulation:
Promotes better emotional control and stability.

Focused breathing

Focused breathing is a mindfulness technique that involves paying attention to your breath, controlling its pace, and using it to anchor your attention. This method helps calm the mind and body, promoting relaxation and mental clarity.

What are the key aspects of focused breathing?

- **Mindfulness:** Paying attention to the present moment and your breath.
- **Control:** Deliberately controlling the pace and depth of your breaths.
- **Anchoring:** Using the breath as a focal point to return to when the mind wanders.



Set aside time
Dedicate a few minutes each day to practice these techniques, especially during stressful times.



Create a relaxing environment
Find a quiet, comfortable space where you can focus without distractions.



Be consistent
Regular practice enhances the effectiveness of these techniques.



Combine techniques
Mix and match different breathing exercises to keep your practice engaging.

How to practice focused breathing

1. **Find a Quiet Space:** Choose a comfortable, quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
2. **Sit or Lie Down Comfortably:** Maintain a relaxed but upright posture if sitting, or lie flat on your back.
3. **Close Your Eyes:** This helps minimise distractions and increases focus.
4. **Breathe Deeply:** Inhale deeply through your nose, allowing your abdomen to rise, then exhale slowly through your mouth.
5. **Focus on Your Breath:** Pay attention to the sensation of the air entering and leaving your body.
6. **Count Your Breaths:** Counting can help maintain focus. For example, inhale for a count of 4, hold for 4, and exhale for 4.

Using shapes to assist with focused breathing

- Shape breathing is a simple relaxation technique that combines slow breathing with tracing the outline of a shape using your eyes, finger, or imagination. As you move along each side of the shape, you match your breath to the movement. This creates a steady rhythm that helps slow the body and mind.

- For example, with triangle breathing, you breathe in for one side, breathe out for the next, and pause or hold for the third side. With box breathing, you breathe in, hold, breathe out and hold again across the four sides of a square.

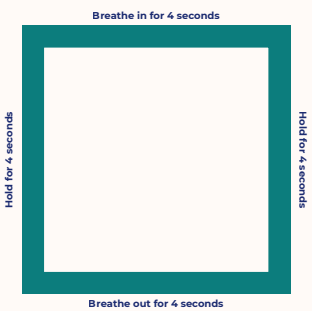
- Using a shape gives the brain something clear and visual to focus on, which can be especially helpful when feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or distracted. It encourages mindful breathing, reduces racing thoughts and can help regulate the nervous system.

Benefits:

Slow, controlled breathing helps calm the nervous system and can reduce the "fight or flight" response. Many people notice they feel more grounded after just a few rounds.

Because it requires attention and rhythm, shape breathing can anchor your mind in the present moment and improve mental clarity.





Notes:

Resources:



Click this link to access the Living Well with ADHD workbook and Transitional pause audio file.



Click this link to access our complimentary resources, downloadable leaflets and further information about different mental health conditions.



Click this link to access our patient-focused webinars - designed to help you better understand mental health and neurodivergent conditions.