



Using your senses to calm yourself

This leaflet gives ideas and tips on simple ways to use your senses to create a calm environment and help you when things get tough. It has been written during the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic when our daily lives have been changed beyond all recognition and our levels of anxiety may be higher than usual.

Make your own list of calming things you like to do

Many of the simple things in life fall into this category. Here are some suggestions that use the various senses:

- Gazing out of the window
- Listening to the birds
- Listening to the roar of the sea or the sound of water
- Watching the sunlight through dappled trees
- Walking through a warm summer meadow
- Rowing on the river
- Gazing at a still pool of water
- Listening to music
- Having a massage (or other therapy)
- Lying in the sun
- Blowing bubbles
- Gardening
- Reading a book
- Looking at photos of your favourite people or places
- Watching a candle flame
- Walking a dog
- Stroking a cat
- Just sitting and being instead of doing!

Using imagery

Although it may not be possible to do some of these things just now, sitting quietly and bringing an image into your mind of your chosen activity or favourite place can have a positive effect.

Try looking at a photo or picture that evokes positive feelings; take time to focus on it.

Smell

Our sense of smell is very immediate. We often hear people say 'that smell took me right back to where I was when I first smelt it'. Evidence suggests that our scent memory can often invoke feelings of the same intensity as the original experience. We can use this in a positive way.

Choose a scent or smell that has a positive association for you. This may be a plant scent such as flowers, wood, grass or leaves; or it could be a food smell – common ones are coffee, chocolate, vanilla, lemon or orange; or it could be a perfume, a scented candle or room scent; freshly laundered clothes – anything at all that works for you.

Now take your chosen scent and sit somewhere quiet, preferably with your eyes closed. Take your time to inhale; really focus on taking in the fragrance and notice how it makes you feel.

It is interesting to note with a scent that if you name how it makes you feel, eg, floating away, energised, in a green forest etc, then the effect may be heightened.

If your chosen aroma is particularly pungent or strong it may cause a stimulating sensation in your nose and trigger a response. This may make you feel more enlivened which in turn can be useful if you need temporary mental stimulation.

Touch

At this time when many of us are unable to have any physical contact with another human being there are other ways which can help satisfy some of that need and can be soothing.

Think of a fabric or texture you like to touch and find something made of this material. This is a very individual thing. Suggestions for fabrics include silk, velvet, soft cotton, linen, chiffon, cashmere or angora wool. Other textures might be a stone, a piece of wood, a crystal, a feather – the list is endless.

Spend some quiet focused time holding or stroking your chosen object and notice how it makes you feel.

You can also try a soft blanket or a scarf to wrap around yourself, or you could cuddle a stuffed animal or a cushion.

Another option is to choose to wear a favourite item of clothing or to keep it near you so you can see and touch it.

Try giving yourself a hug. One way to do this is the squeeze hug which can be calming and help you reconnect to your body:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=KeGybW3zuxo

Another way is something called the butterfly hug which can be very grounding:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGGJrqscvtU

If giving yourself a hug is not quite the right thing for you, try this calming technique called alternate hand clasping:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKnPHsouVQM

Music

Music and other sounds can be very important to support our emotions. We often think of using music for calming and relaxation but it can also be reviving, energizing and uplifting.

Here is a link to a website that was originally designed to support people with dementia and their families. It includes some excellent tips and resources that are relevant to anyone and you can use to help compile your own personal playlist: www.playlistforlife.org.uk

Taste

We may not be able to eat the things we usually do, but try to focus on the sensation of eating and practise eating mindfully.

Select a favourite thing to eat from what you have available and really savour it – smell it first, take your time eating it and notice how it makes you feel.

If you don't feel like eating, inhaling the smell of food (or an essential oil if you have one) may help. Try foods from the citrus family such as lemon, lime, grapefruit or orange, or from the herb and spice family such as black pepper, coriander, tarragon, basil, cumin, mint, rosemary, lemon balm or lemon verbena.

Other help and support

The Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre website contains additional helpful information and support resources, including access to the LJMC audio relaxation CD.

We are working all the time to update the site and add more resources.

www.ljmc.org

If you need any other support during or after your treatment for cancer, or just want to talk to someone, please call the Helpline at the Lynda Jackson Macmillan Centre.

This is staffed Monday–Friday, 9.30am–4.30pm.

020 3826 2555