



# MANAGING STRESS, ANXIETY AND LOW MOOD

Your guide to managing mental health during the menopause transition with practical, proven tools for you to try out, shared by our team of specialists




# STRESS AND MENOPAUSE

The word 'stress' is used to describe the physical and/or emotional response to the demands and pressures of life or situations that trigger a 'fight, flight or freeze' reaction caused by a surge of cortisol and adrenaline.

Stress can be a positive thing, which drives us on and helps us to grow, develop and be stimulated. However, fluctuating hormone levels during menopause alter the way we physically and emotionally respond to stress. This can bring on feelings of depression or anxiety, or make us feel overwhelmed and isolated. Stress can be experienced physically, triggering insomnia, hot flushes, palpitations, nausea or dizziness. We can find ourselves getting into a vicious cycle – stress suppresses our already reduced supply of hormones which makes us more anxious.

Some women who don't recognise that these feelings are hormonal are sometimes prescribed antidepressants as a solution. But there are plenty of natural ways to manage your symptoms and calm down your nervous system.



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# LOW MOOD AND MENOPAUSE

For some, the menopause transition can be marked by low mood and for one in four women, depression. Life can feel overwhelming, especially when accompanied by other changes or disruptions in life.

Oestrogen helps keep cortisol – our stress hormone – in check, so when this rises, it can also affect mood. People may experience mood swings, sensitivity, irritability and tearfulness due to fluctuations and dips in progesterone.

Maisie Hill, hormone specialist and author of *Perimenopause Power*, describes perimenopause as **'like having those rose tinted spectacles taken off'**.

Low mood makes people feel lethargic and has a knock-on effect on how well we self-care and our ability to function at work or fulfil family responsibilities. This workbook will give you tools to boost your outlook and feel empowered about this time of life. Always speak to a mental health professional or clinician to get immediate support if you are feeling suicidal or depressed.



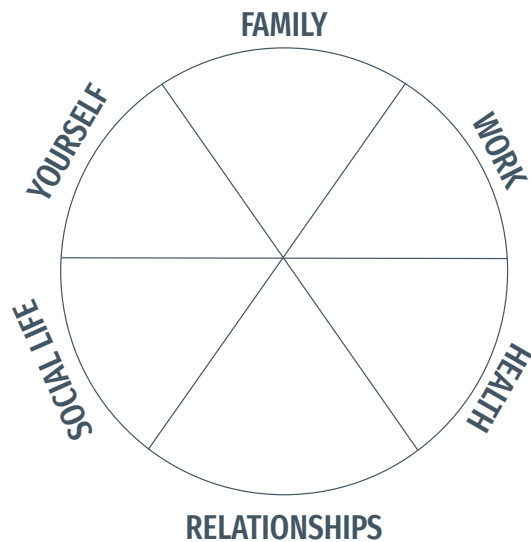
# INTERCONNECTED

Our body and mind are interconnected.

We can learn to control our physical experiences in menopause by remaining calm and directing our thoughts more positively.



# THE WHEEL OF STRIFE



The wheel of strife is a useful tool to help you identify the areas in your life that are currently causing you stress. Put some time aside to help you work out exactly what aspects of your life are stressful.

You can use colour shading or a rating system (0–10) to highlight which section is causing you the most stress and needs to be addressed first.





# UNHELPFUL THINKING

These are some examples of cognitive distortions.  
What do you recognise?

- ✦ Catastrophising
- ✦ 'All or nothing' thinking
- ✦ Assuming bad things will be repeated
- ✦ Only noticing the negative in a situation
- ✦ Assuming others are thinking the worst
- ✦ Often using 'should', 'could', 'ought to'
- ✦ Being unkind and blaming yourself
- ✦ Taking things personally
- ✦ Assuming you don't have any control to make a situation better





**YOUR POWER  
TOOLS**



# **SPECIALIST SUPPORT**



# A CLINICIAN

A good place to start when you are feeling anxious or low is to **visit your clinician** and discuss what support is available. Since the pandemic, there are even more online services and apps. If you are in the UK these can be found on the NHS Library.

For example, Silvercloud is a 6-week online programme, or Improving Access to Psychological Therapy (IAPT) provides up to 10 weeks of talking therapy with a qualified psychotherapist. If you want to go down the private route, look at the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) website to find a suitable therapist.



# A HERBALIST

Qualified herbalists are trained to degree level and fall under what's called functional medicine. They are able to diagnose health issues and prescribe much stronger herbs and blends than are available online or over the counter.

It's important to discuss your medical history and any medications you're on with your herbalist. Look at the websites for the National Institute of Medical Herbalists (NIMH) or the College of Practitioners of Phytotherapy (CPP) for a qualified herbalist.

## Herbs known to support stress and boost mood are:

- ✧ Ashwagandha
- ✧ Valerian
- ✧ Ginger
- ✧ Turmeric
- ✧ St John's Wort



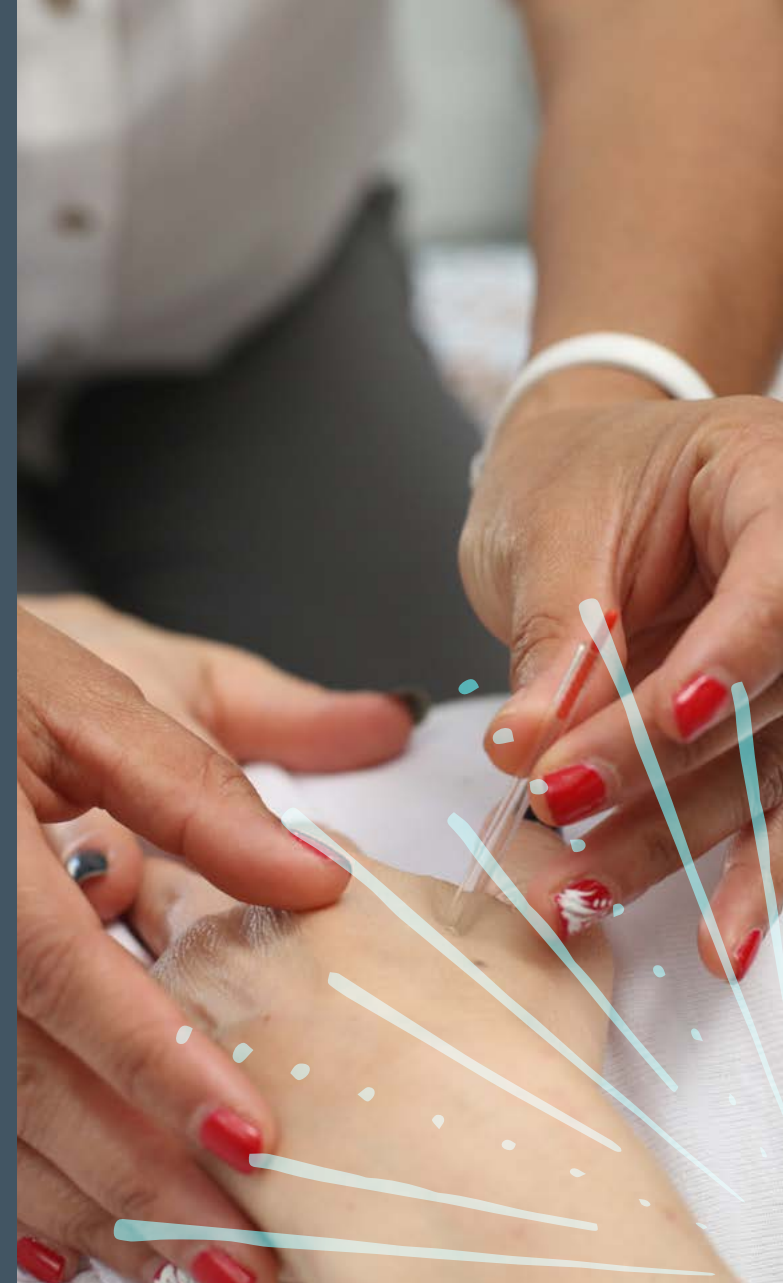
# ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncture is an ancient healing system dating back thousands of years and has its roots in Taoist philosophy. It is based on the theory that energy – Qi – flows through a network of connected meridians. When Qi is out of balance, illness and poor immunity will arise. Seeing an acupuncturist can be helpful in addressing stress, which may be the root cause of other problems such as hot flushes or headaches.



## Challenge

Next time you are feeling stressed or anxious, try this acupressure tool – squeeze on the ‘hand valley point’, found in the skin between the index finger and thumb.





# MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness uses different principles and tools to help bring us into the present moment, switch off thoughts and tune in to our bodily sensations and the environment. It is recognised as an evidence-based way to relieve stress.

Practising mindfulness can be helpful during menopause. This includes daily meditation, as well as changing one's mindset using seven principles:

- ✦ Non-judging
- ✦ Beginner's mind
- ✦ Non-striving
- ✦ Accepting
- ✦ Patience
- ✦ Trust
- ✦ Letting Go

To learn more,  
you can sign up  
to an 8-week  
Mindfulness-Based  
Stress Reduction  
programme.

To find a qualified  
practitioner visit  
[www.bamba.org.uk](http://www.bamba.org.uk).



# HYPNOTHERAPY

Cognitive Behavioural Hypnotherapy helps put you in a deep state of relaxation and uses techniques to reshape thoughts, feelings and behaviour to become more helpful.

- ✦ Provide deep relaxation
- ✦ Accesses the subconscious mind
- ✦ Aids problem-solving
- ✦ Tricks the mind

You can find a  
qualified practitioner  
on the [GHR website](#)



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# RETRAIN THE BRAIN

“ The greatest weapon against stress or mood is our ability to choose one thought over another ”

**William James**

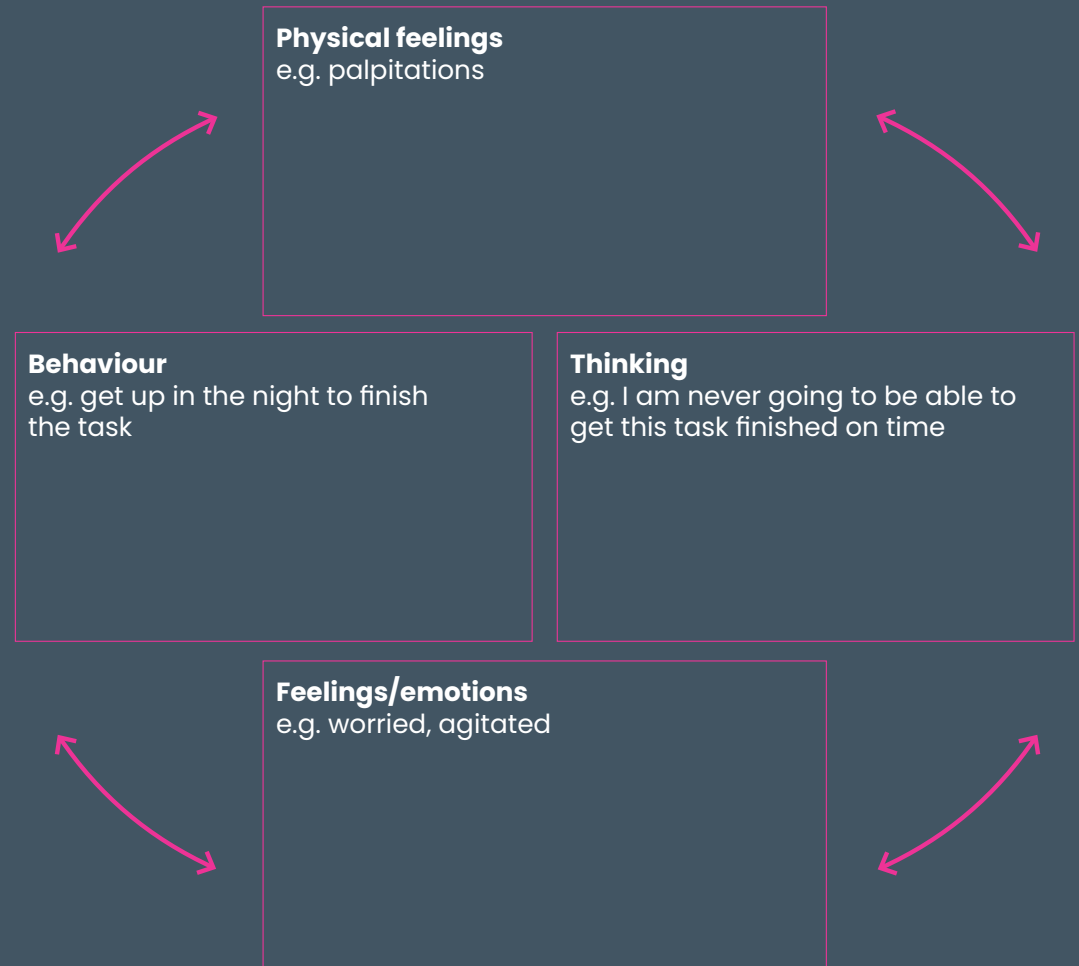


# NEGATIVE LOOP

Thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviour are all interlinked. You have the power to break the chain and retrain your brain from an unhelpful to a helpful cycle.

This worksheet helps you identify limiting beliefs so you can start to make transformative change.

Fill in the boxes to identify how you respond to different situations.



# REFRAME THINKING

Our mind is wired to think negatively, but a thought becomes a feeling and a feeling will influence our behaviour. To move away from negative narratives and break the chain, try to reframe thoughts more positively or neutrally.

## From...

- ✦ I can't cope with this
- ✦ Everyone is looking at me
- ✦ This is out of control
- ✦ This is never going to end

## ...to

- ✦
- ✦
- ✦
- ✦



# THE SURVEY METHOD

To help you think about a more helpful way to approach the situation, ask people if your thoughts and attitudes are realistic. For example, if you believe that anxiety around public speaking is embarrassing and abnormal, ask friends if they have ever felt nervous before giving a talk.

## Think about the following two questions:

1. Would a friend agree 100% with this worried thought? If not, what advice might they give to help you approach the situation differently and more calmly?
2. Conversely, if a friend had this worry, would you agree with them and what advice would you give to help them cope? What would you suggest your friend changes about their thinking?



# EXPERIMENTATION TOOL

It can be helpful to do an experiment to test out the validity of a negative thought. For example, if you are having a panic attack and are terrified you are going to die of a heart attack, you could jog on the spot or run up a flight of stairs to prove your heart is healthy and strong.

This might feel counterintuitive, but it allows you to bring back control of your body and mind. It means that the next time you think you are having a heart attack you will have an example of when you challenged a negative thought and things turned out all right.





# EXAMINE THE EVIDENCE

In this exercise you will put a thought on trial by acting as a defence lawyer, prosecutor and judge to determine the accuracy of the thought.

## Prosecution and defence

Gather evidence for and against your thought. Evidence can only be used if it's a verifiable fact. No interpretations, guesses or opinions!

## Judge

Come to a verdict regarding your thought. Is the thought accurate and fair? Are there other thoughts that could explain the facts?



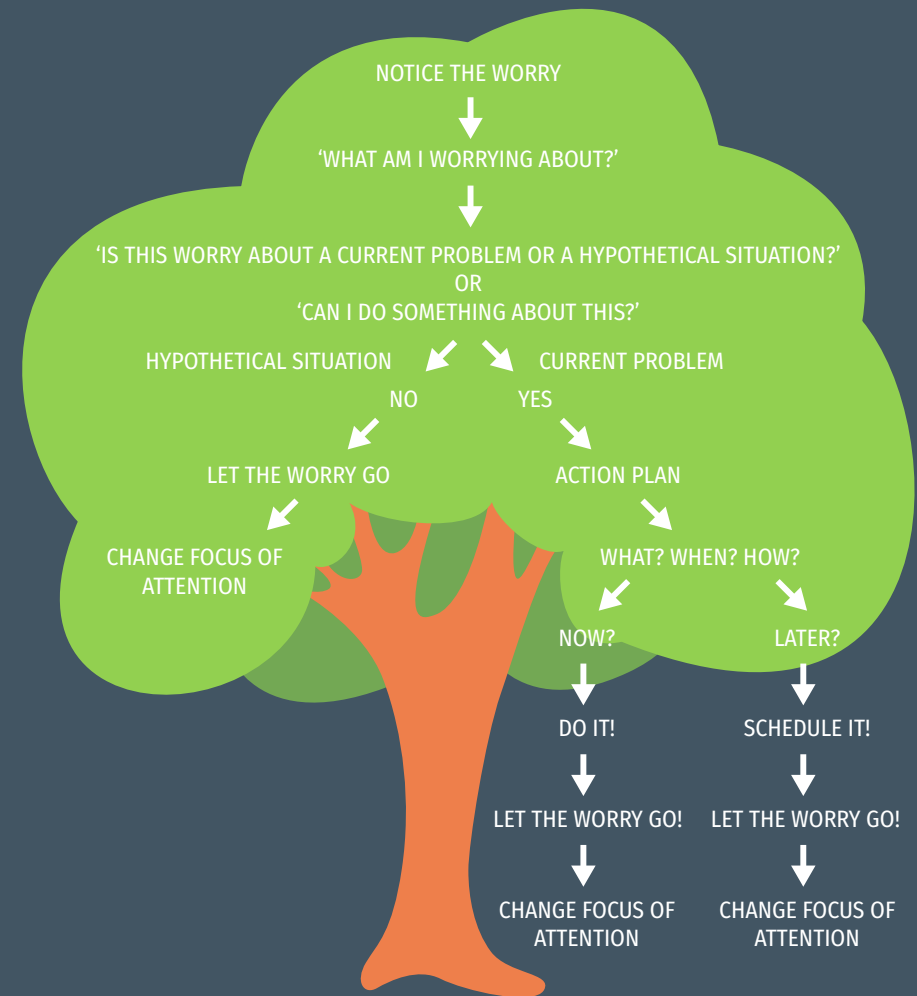
# CONSERVE ENERGY

We can waste a lot of energy worrying, depleting us of limited supplies. Over time this can lead to chronic stress and health problems. 'The Worry Tree' is a simple technique to help us identify whether worries are real or imagined fears, as well as what aspects of life are worth attending to.

## ☆ Challenge

Use these questions to guide your energy and control your worries:

- ✦ Is the problem imagined or real?
- ✦ If imagined, let the worry go
- ✦ If real, what do you need to do?
- ✦ By when and how?
- ✦ Schedule this in
- ✦ Let the worry go!





# THOUGHT BLOCKING

Did you know that we have around 70,000 thoughts a day but 80% of these are the same. We can get stuck in a negative narrative loop with the same thoughts repeating themselves. Here is a simple tool to help you stop the inner voice.

## Challenge

Next time you have a negative thought, repeat the word 'the' every 2-3 seconds. It can be helpful to mouth 'the' without saying it.

Sounds too simple to be true, but it really does work!



# THE CIRCLE OF EXCELLENCE

Worrying excessively can make us feel unsafe, unsettled and low in confidence. This Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) tool is a visualisation. It activates calm feelings by association with a positive past event.

## ☆ Challenge

- ✦ Step into the circle
- ✦ Imagine a time when you were happy, safe and confident
- ✦ Create a hand gesture to associate with this memory
- ✦ Step out of the circle
- ✦ Step back into the circle
- ✦ Activate the memory with the hand gesture
- ✦ Step out of the circle
- ✦ Use this visualisation whenever you need a boost

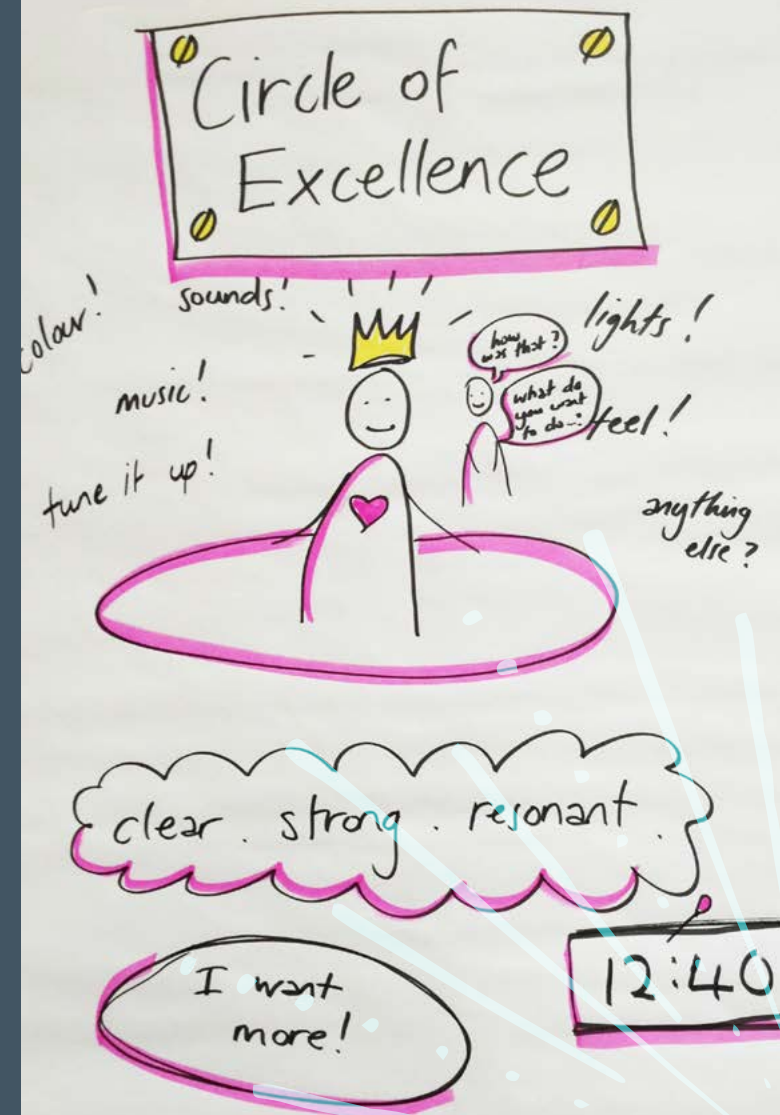


Illustration by Sabrina Francis, Barefoot Coaching, 2020

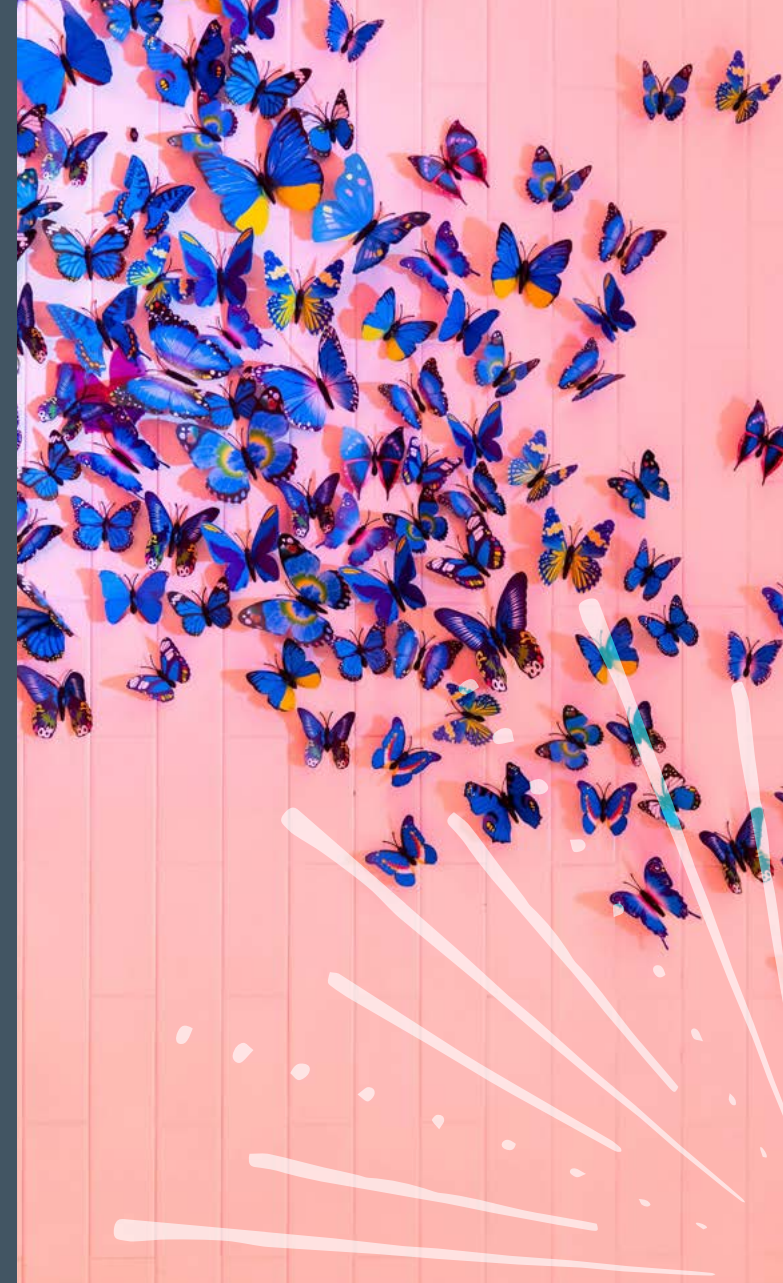
# WORRY NET VISUALISATION

The brain doesn't distinguish between what's real or fantasy, but by using visualisations we can manipulate our mind to believe our worries have been removed.



## Challenge

- ✦ Close your eyes and imagine your worries are butterflies
- ✦ Picture each worry as a different creature
- ✦ Then imagine a net scooping them away





# 3 Ps FOR POSITIVITY

When we start to look out for joy, positivity finds us. Having a gratitude journal can help boost our mood as it helps us find reasons to be thankful, even when life feels difficult. It also allows us to remember previous happy entries from previous logs.

## Challenge

At the end of each day, write down your three Ps of gratitude. A:

- ✦ person
- ✦ place
- ✦ possibility



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# HARNESS THE BREATH

# PACED BREATHING

Paced breathing slows our breath right down stimulating the vagus nerve – which triggers our parasympathetic nervous system – to lower blood pressure and boost chemicals in the brain associated with a feeling of calm.



## Challenge

When you're feeling stressed or depressed, relax your shoulders. Close your eyes and focus on slow, deep breathing. Breathe in for four seconds, hold the breath for seven, breathe out for eight.





# MEDITATION

Meditation helps to empty negative thoughts or accept worries as just a fleeting visitor that will soon be on their way. Just ten minutes of meditation a day can change the brain structure, creating more grey matter that increases self-control, compassion and calmness.

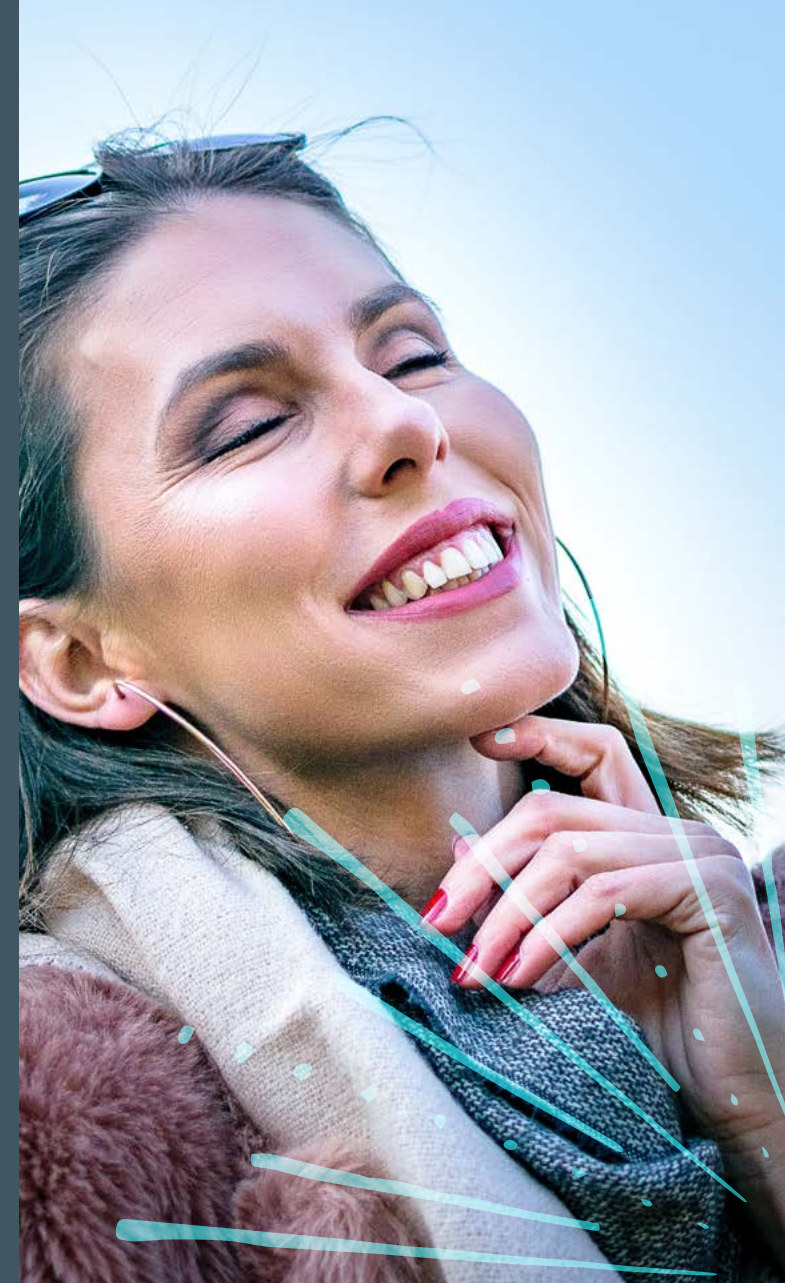


# 3-STEP BREATHING TOOL

This simple tool helps us connect back into ourselves and be curious about why we are feeling the way we are. By becoming aware of thoughts and sensations, we can question whether they are real or not and feel more in control of the moment.

## ☆ Challenge

- ✦ **Step 1: Awareness of what is**  
The aim for this initial step is simply to ask yourself, 'what is my experience right now?'
- ✦ **Step 2: Gathering the breath**  
The aim is to use the breath to anchor you in the present away from distracting thoughts.
- ✦ **Step 3: Expanding awareness to the body**  
The aim is to expand awareness to all of the physical sensations in the body and use the breath to push out any tension.





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# NUTRITION AND SUPPLEMENTS

# ADAPTOGENS

Adaptogens are a class of healing plants that help to balance, restore and protect the body from the prolonged release of stress hormones due to chronic stress that may be experienced during the menopause transition.

They do this by doing the following:

- ✦ Boosting the immune system
- ✦ Increasing mental focus
- ✦ Encouraging a balanced mood
- ✦ Balancing hormones

They come in different formats: a herbal tea, powder, capsules and syrups.





# TRIGGER HAPPY

Tryptophan – an amino acid that converts into serotonin – can boost our mood and sleep. Find it in foods such as bananas, pumpkin and sesame seeds, cheese, eggs, poultry and tomatoes. Add them to your shopping list this week.



# HEALTHY GUT, HEALTHY MIND

Our gut and brain are connected by the vagus nerve. As we get older, our gut bacteria can become unbalanced and impact our mood. Introduce probiotics into your diet with fermented foods and drinks such as kombucha, kefir, tempeh, sauerkraut, kimchi and probiotic yoghurt.





# REDUCE ALCOHOL

Alcohol increases cortisol, our stress hormone, so whilst we might feel more relaxed in the short term, it alters the way the body responds to stress and can become more habitual with sustained stress.

Avoid alcohol midweek (Monday to Thursday) and note down how it makes you feel. What else can you do – or substitute alcohol with – to give you the same wind-down effect?



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# RELAXING RITUALS

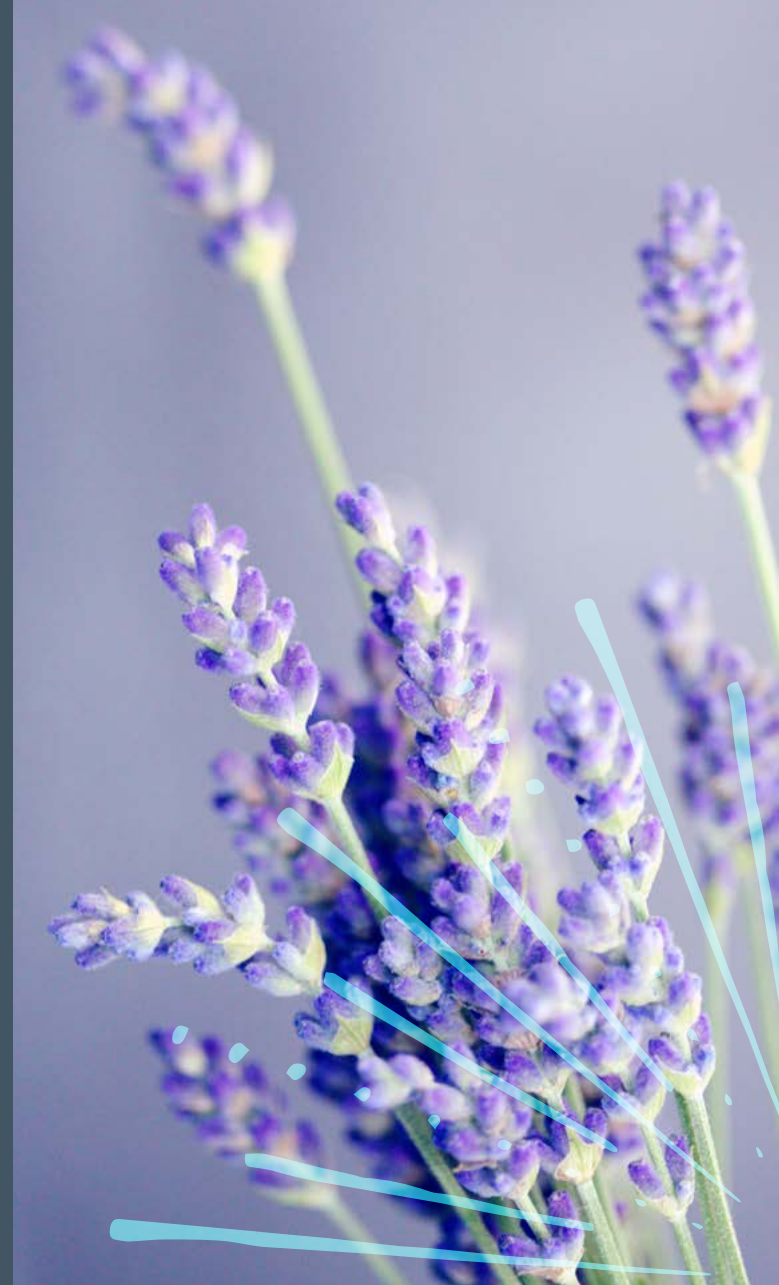
# MOOD-BOOSTING ESSENTIAL OILS

Essential oils have been used throughout history to alter our mood. The part of our brain that is associated with smell is placed next to the part that stores memories and regulates our emotions.

Some essential oils associated with reducing stress are:

- ✧ Vanilla
- ✧ Lavender
- ✧ Geranium
- ✧ Ylang Ylang
- ✧ Jasmine
- ✧ Cedarwood

Always use a high grade, therapeutic oil to notice a benefit.



# SOOTHE WITH A SOUND BATH

Soundwaves have been proven to calm down our 'fight, flight or freeze' response.

Sound baths are a meditative practice that use vibrations to pass through the body. They can be helpful to manage anxiety, boost our parasympathetic nervous system that calms us, and block out any negative thoughts.



# CREATE A CALMING ASSOCIATION

Something that helps increase calming associations is a daily ritual that is repeated in the same way. This helps us feel safe and reduces our 'fight or flight' response. This might be doing some restorative yoga, breathing or listening to a guided meditation.

Get experimental and find something that works for you.





# GET MOVING

You might not associate movement with relaxation but doing moderate movement for 30 minutes a day has been clinically proven to boost mood and help alleviate stress.

Even better when you are outside as exposure to daylight helps us sleep better too.



# SUMMARY

- ✦ Stress and low mood are often the root cause of other bothersome aspects of menopause
- ✦ We can control and influence our mind with awareness and willingness
- ✦ Be experimental, curious and playful
- ✦ Journal down any improvements and signs of progress

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