

DECOMPRESS AND AID SLEEP BY USING YOUR SENSES.



Getting in touch with your senses to help you decompress and aid sleep.

In challenging times your senses are being constantly bombarded by stressful experiences, often without you even realising it.

Your brain is too busy dealing with the crises facing you. You need to take split second, critical decisions, find huge amounts of energy as well as limitless empathy and understanding when dealing with patients or colleagues.

Unsurprisingly, it's very difficult to calm down and relax at the end of a shift so that you get a restful sleep and are fit to deal with it all over again.

Psychologist, Daniel Kahneman, in his book *'Thinking Fast and Slow'* identifies two levels at which the brain works.

System 1 or **'Fast'** thinking, which we use intuitively, especially when working in high pressure situations, and **System 2** or **'Slow'** thinking, which we have to make much more effort to engage but can be hugely beneficial in mastering our thoughts, decompressing and making decisions in a mindful way.

This simple approach is designed to help you to engage System 2, by using a technique to get back in touch with your 5 senses so that you can master your thoughts and develop coping strategies to allow you to relax and get some much needed rest.

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AREA OF FOCUS	HOW TO DO IT
<p>1. 54321 technique</p>	<p>Many sources reference this as a helpful way to slow down the brain, get in touch with System 2 thinking and clear your mind:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for 5 things you can see and really focus on looking at them • Touch 4 things around you and think about the feeling you experience • Listen to 3 sounds you can hear and focus on them • Sniff out 2 things you can smell and what memories they bring • Taste what's in your mouth and what pleasure it brought you <p>However, you may not be in a brilliant place physically, not in your own home or space and some of these observations may just reinforce unhelpful feelings from the day you've just been through. So, how could you turn this into a positive experience to really help you to decompress and relax?</p>
<p>2. Reconnecting with your senses</p>	<p>If you just find one positive thing to soothe each of your senses it will be remarkably helpful and much easier than just trying to empty your mind. You are finding positive experiences for your senses to replace what you have been through during the day.</p> <p>1. Sight – find a picture or collection of images which make you feel happy or calm and spend a few minutes really looking at them. Natural scenes, animals, seascapes and art can be more helpful than personal images, which could serve to take you into a place of loneliness or dislocation. Practise replacing the images from your day with these pictures.</p> <p>2. Touch – your sense of touch has been inundated with uncomfortable feelings all day and you may have been cut off from being able to touch other people. Spend a few minutes putting on body moisturiser and cream to sooth your face and lips. It doesn't have to take long or be a luxury product. Dry oil spray or left over after sun works just as well. Put on clothes which are comfortable and use natural fibres on your bed clothes. However, the real benefit comes from taking time to experience how this feels against your skin, so stop and do this.</p> <p>3. Hearing – try to zone out from a potentially noisy environment by listening to different, soothing sounds to block out the auditory memories of the day. Ambient sounds, calming music or soothing voices are all helpful but you need to find the sounds which work for you. Sir Patrick Stewart has been reading a sonnet a day – this great Shakespearean actor with a profoundly moving voice reading words from a bygone era is a great example.</p> <p>4. Smell – our sense of smell connects us to memories and experiences (both pleasant and unpleasant) very strongly and immediately 'places' us. It can play a very positive role in distancing us from stress and putting us in a positive place. Scents like lavender, rosemary and pine are often recommended to aid sleep and clear the olfactory nerves. However, they can often be used in disinfectant so may not help in distancing ourselves from the stresses of the day. Perhaps, instead, think of smells which you associate with happy thoughts of your own and find ways to bring these into the room. Focus on the feelings which smells invoke – a shower gel you got in a hotel on a memorable holiday, musty books or clean paper are always good ones to try.</p> <p>5. Taste – enjoy the foods or drinks you like the taste of and take time to savour them. It could be as simple as a good cup of tea, a fruit drink or toast with butter. Whatever you eat or drink, however tired and hungry you are, it should be savoured and eaten slowly to ensure it forms part of your relaxation and decompression. Food eaten quickly will only add to your stress and discomfort.</p> <p>If you can take a few minutes to think about the things which will reward your senses and make a note of them this will help, even if you can't manage them all right now. If you can't sleep, why not reflect on the sensory things you love rather than fretting about the day behind you or ahead of you.</p>

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3. Other sensory connections which may help	<p>The World Economic Forum also identifies other sensory perceptions which can be a subject for reflection and meditation.</p> <p>The sense of balance – we take it for granted, but taking a moment to think about how we are grounded by gravity and connected to the earth slows down our thinking. Movement always feels good – gentle movement like stretching, yoga poses and slow dancing can help to relax the body and tired muscles to aid sleep.</p> <p>The sense of heat and cold as well as pain can add to a feeling of discomfort. Connect with these feelings and use your other positive sensory experiences to help overcome them. Focus on how your body feels and make a conscious effort to relax muscles and sooth the aches and pains through movement and gentle touch.</p> <p>The sense of the passing of time is another area identified as being specific to humans – reflect on the good times both in the past and to come, but also think about the good things right now. There will be positives – a sense of purpose, team spirit, kindness and gratitude. As you relax to sleep find the positive emotions from the day and recognise your results and achievements, rather than focusing on negative thoughts.</p>
4. Breathing	<p>Take time to breath – there are techniques you can use such as counting and slowing down your breathing. Find the ones which work best for you but as with all the other techniques, really focus on it. Apps such as Headspace and Calm can be particularly helpful when it comes to meditation and mindful breathing.</p>
5. Other tools	<p>There are other toolkits which will also help you to develop positive habits and master your thoughts which you might want to take a look at (self-mastery, circles of influence and concern, managing anxiety and resilience hints and tips). These will also support you to develop a positive frame of mind in a crisis which will help you to decompress and sleep better.</p>
And finally	<p>If you can't sleep – or you wake before you should and can't get back to sleep, don't fight it too hard or get too stressed. Are you still resting? Can you use the time to think positive thoughts? If not, get up and move around gently. If you can go outside or open a window do so. The old saying 'the darkest hour is just before the dawn' is worth a moment of reflection. Watching the light gradually returning as the new day arrives can be a magical time, especially if you focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Watching the things around you reappear as the light grows• Touch your bare arms to feel the chill on your skin• Listen to the sounds you can hear (even in the city birds sing)• Smell the earth, the trees or breakfast cooking• Savour an early cup of tea or a cool drink of water.

Links & References

1. Daniel Kahneman *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Penguin (2012) .
2. 54321 University of Rochester Medical Center (2017).
World Economic Forum 2017.