

STOP

STOP stands for **Step Back, Take a breath, Observe** your experience (Body, Emotions, and Thoughts) and then **Proceed** by asking yourself, what's most important to pay attention to now. It only takes a few minutes and you can try it anywhere.

It can be helpful if you feel overwhelmed by your emotions, if you feel anxiety or a sense of rising panic or if you feel stuck, indecisive or confused. It can take as little as two minutes or as long as you like. If you have practiced at home you will find it easier to call on this as a strategy in other situations.

It can help you to respond to a situation rather than reacting in an automatic way, slipping into old patterns or allowing things to spiral and get worse.

Step back Stepping back or sitting back allows us to get a little psychological distance from a situation and then pause and consider what's going on before moving forward. If you are working, move back slightly from your desk. If you're at home, step back from the action and sit down. If you're in an exam, put down your pen and sit back. Try to be still for a few moments. It can help to place your feet squarely on the floor to feel rooted and drop the shoulders to release tension.

Take a breath Take 2 or 3 (or more if you have time) intentional breaths preferably through the nose but however it feels comfortable. Gently inhale your breath and then let it go with a spirit of release and relief. Focus on your body – for example, notice the rise and fall of your stomach, the feeling of the breath through your nostrils or lips. Bringing conscious awareness to the breath allows us to continue the process of stopping, becoming stable in and present for a few moments. Focused breathing also allows us to get out of our head and into our body which can provide a small breathing space, maybe slow down negative thinking – catastrophizing or panicking – and give us a chance to take things in another direction.

Observe the situation. Having slowed things down through stepping back and breathing, you're in a better position to consider the situation from this slight distance – think of it as being on the edge of an emotional whirlpool looking in rather than being caught up in the whirlpool. From this position, observe your inner landscape – what are the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations? Bring an attitude of acceptance to whatever you are sensing. Don't judge yourself for feeling anxious, negative, tense or however else you may be feeling and don't engage with the thoughts or feelings. Just observe as if you were watching a film. Having stopped and brought full awareness to the present moment experience allows us to observe what is going on at this moment with greater emotional balance and clarity. We can be more objective and less judgmental.

Proceed. Having observed a situation with greater emotional balance and clarity, we are now in a better position to proceed to take action, likely in a wiser and more productive way than if we had not stopped but acted reactively and automatically. Ask yourself "What is called for now?" or "What is the next task, the next, most important thing for me to turn my attention to?" and then move on to your next action. The idea is that what you have observed in the previous step may help you to make better choice for yourself. Note that sometimes we will determine, having taken the opportunity to stop and observe, that the best way to proceed is at this moment to take no action at all but simply to return to what we were doing feeling calmer and more in control.

STOP and Take a Breathing Space came out of MBSR (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction). You will find lots on Mindfulness on you tube and elsewhere by googling. Jon Kabat-Zinn is a good starting point.