

Royal Hospital for  
Sick Children

# Irritable Bowel Syndrome



## **Booklet 3: Ways to cope with stress**

**This booklet tells you simple and fun ways to control and relieve your stress, so you can keep your IBS symptoms at bay. They are all easy to do with a little practice, and you don't need any special equipment to do them.**

**Deep breathing** – deep or 'abdominal' breathing is a good one to start with. It may take a bit of practice to master, but be patient and you'll get there.

Place one hand on your tummy. Take a slow deep breath in, and imagine that there is a balloon inside your tummy that is inflating when you breathe in, and deflating when you breathe out.

Breathe in slowly and deeply, and feel your tummy rise. Breathe out slowly, and feel your tummy fall. Don't force your breathing; just make it deeper and slower. Keep breathing like this at least 10 to 20 times.

You can do exercises like these anytime, without anyone noticing. You can even do breathing exercises in class if you're nervous about something.

**Calming pictures** – creating a calming picture in your mind (sometimes called 'visualisation') can be a helpful way to relax and manage pain.

Two types of calming picture you can try are:

- A special place where you feel safe and relaxed
- A soothing picture to ease your pain.

**A special place** – during this exercise, you can imagine a special place where you feel safe and relaxed. This can be any place that you like – for instance, an outdoor place, a room in your house, somewhere nice you have visited, an imaginary room decorated with your favourite things, or a favourite place from a TV programme or film.



**Use your senses** when you imagine you are there.

Notice what you can **see** around you and imagine the different shapes and colours.

Try to imagine the **sounds** you can hear, for example running water, a sea breeze, or music.

Think of the **smells** that you find relaxing, for example hot food, cut grass, or bubble bath.

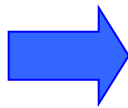
Think of the **tastes** that you like or find calming, like your favourite drink and meal.

Imagine how it **feels** to touch parts of the image, like sand, grass, or your favourite toy.

Let any tension drain out of your body and take time to imagine the different sights, sounds, tastes and textures of the special place. Breathe slowly and gently as you explore.

You could imagine yourself sitting or lying down in the special place, or doing something you enjoy. Perhaps you are alone or with other people. Allow yourself to relax and enjoy your surroundings for as long as you want to stay there. Take some time to enjoy the feeling of relaxation and then slowly open your eyes and get up in your own time.

**A soothing picture** – for this calming picture exercise, you first imagine a picture of your pain, and then turn it into something more calming as you breathe.



**Picture the pain:** does it feel like burning or cramping? Is it an ache or a shooting or prickly feeling? If it were a colour or shape, what would it be? Perhaps it reminds you of an annoying person, a fireball or a type of weather.

Once you have a picture of the pain in your head, you can imagine the picture changing, and gradually change the picture a little more each time you breathe out. Allow yourself to relax more and more as you keep breathing.

For example, if the pain is like a red ball of fire burning inside your tummy, you might want to imagine the flames cooling to a sunset, a blue colour or being put out with water. Alternatively, the ball of fire could shoot up into the sky getting further and further away from you, making the pain in your tummy disappear.



If the pain is sharp and prickly, you might want to imagine the sharp or prickly sensations getting softer or smoother.



If it feels as if your tummy is getting tighter and tighter, you could imagine that you have a special tool that can unwind the tension.



If the pain feels like a hard lump inside your tummy, you could imagine the lump slowly turning to jelly or dissolving away.

Play with your imagination until you find something that works for you!

**Distraction** – distraction (thinking about something else) is a good technique to cope with things that make us feel worried, scared or upset, and can also help to cope with pain. The best forms of distraction need quite a lot of concentration to keep our minds busy and away from the thing that is bothering us. It needs lots of practice and is not always easy, but it does work!



## Number games

- Counting backwards from 100, or an even larger number like 1000.
- Doing a times table, or trying to do it backwards!
- Fizz-Buzz – a counting game where you can't say three or seven; instead you have to say 'fizz' for three, and 'buzz' for seven. So 1, 2, fizz, 4, 5, 6, buzz, 8, 9, 10, etc. To make it harder, do the same for numbers that divide exactly by 3 or by 7. So 1, 2, fizz, 4, 5, fizz, buzz, 8, fizz, 10, 11, 12, 13, buzz, etc.

## Rhymes or songs

- Try and repeat as many nursery rhymes as you can
- Sing the lyrics of a favourite song
- Try and remember all of the songs a band has had in the charts
- Do a tongue twister, for example “red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry, yellow lorry” or “six thick thistle sticks, six thick thistle sticks”.
- Make up a poem.





## Letter or word games

- Think of as many animals, names, foods, places etc. as you can with different letters of the alphabet. For example, B for animals - badger, buffalo, bird, bear, baboon.
- Play 'stop the bus' with someone. One person says the alphabet quietly and the other person says 'stop'. Whatever letter you were on is the letter you have to play with. Choose three different things that each of you has to say beginning with that letter, for instance a country, a food, and a name. The first person to get all three things with that letter says "stop the bus" and wins. For example., the letter S could be Scotland, sausages, Samantha.
- Play the famous person game – one person says a famous person's name, for example "Justin Bieber". The next person has to say another famous person beginning with the letter of the surname, so here 'B'. If they then said "Britney Spears" the next person has to say one starting with an 'S', and so on.
- Say the alphabet backwards. Try and time it and get faster.
- Say as many words as you know in a foreign language.
- Repeat the names of all the boys and girls in your class, or the names of all the teachers you have ever had at school.

## Memories

- Think about a favourite memory like a holiday or nice event. Try and remember it in as much detail as you can - what it looked like, what you could smell, what you could feel, what you ate, who was there, what you were wearing etc.
- Think about something exciting that you might have planned, for example a party.



### Looking around the room

Count as many colours as you can in the room you are in.

Add as many other ideas as you can. Try and vary the games you play each time so you don't get bored of one thing.

**Manage unhelpful thoughts** - notice if particular types of thoughts run through your head when you are feeling stressed or are experiencing IBS symptoms, like 'When will this stop?', 'I'm never going to get rid of this?' or 'The IBS is ruining everything!'

Try to challenge these thoughts by reminding yourself of the times that you have coped and the things you have managed to achieve despite the IBS.



## Where next?

If the symptoms remain as bad or have got worse despite trying these suggestions, it may be helpful to let your doctor know. If you think it would be helpful to talk with someone about these difficulties and how to help manage them in more detail, your doctor may be able to refer you to the Paediatric Psychology and Liaison Service (PPALS).

## Useful websites

Kidshealth.org

relaxkids.com

**We would be very grateful for your feedback on these booklets. Please visit:**

[www.surveymonkey.com/s/8Y9JSNP](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/8Y9JSNP) for parent or carers,

[www.surveymonkey.com/s/6DWST9M](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/6DWST9M) for young people.

**Many thanks**

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Date: December 2011  
For review: December 2013