

Charlotte Sharpe

My top 10 tips for soothing stress



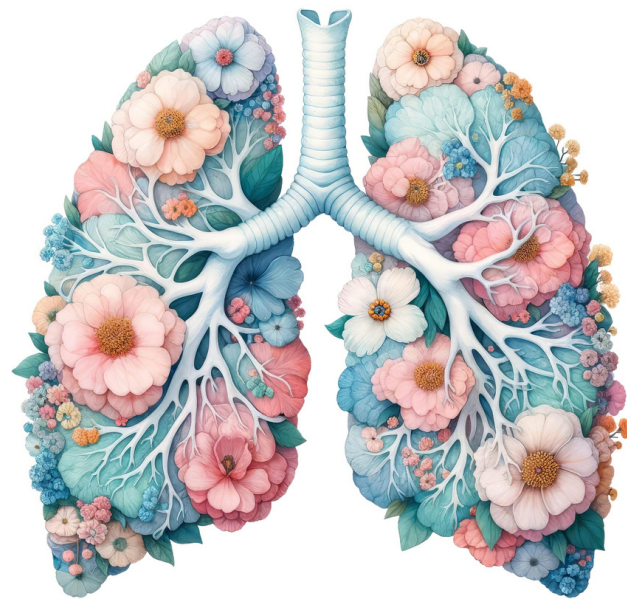
Biological strategies to boost well-being

Foundational to our mental health is making sure that we've eaten, slept, moved and seen someone recently. I appreciate some of these things are a challenge, particularly in early motherhood, but try, as much as you can, to make these your non-negotiables. These are my top tips and favourite resources to help you get there. They can be used whether you're stressed, anxious, feeling low, or burned-out. Given that these are all mind-body problems, let's look at some ways of regulating your nervous system first.

Ground yourself by breathing

When we are stressed, carbon dioxide builds up in our system, as the small air sacs in our lungs stock working. This excess of carbon dioxide makes us feel agitated. In order to downregulate the stress response, and activate our parasympathetic nervous system we can use the physiological sigh. This involves two quick inhales through the nose, followed by a long, slow, exhale through the mouth. The double inhale of the physiological sigh increases the alveoli's capacity, and the long exhale expels the carbon dioxide, resulting in a calming effect.

Alternatively, you can use box breathing or, just always ensuring that your outbreath is longer and slower than your inhale. The extended exhale activates the vagus nerve, which sends a signal from the brain all the way down into the gut telling your body it is safe to enter into a 'rest and digest' nervous system state (this is the opposite to the 'fight or flight' state). Try doing the box breath, or the extended exhale breathing for 10 rounds.



Burnout



Solve Your
Stress Cycle

Complete your stress cycle

The best way to do this is through exercise. In the words of Dr Anna Lembke, Psychiatrist and director of Stanford Addiction Medicine, "the evidence is indisputable, exercise has a more profound and sustained effect on mood, anxiety, cognition, energy and sleep than any pill I can prescribe" (Dopamine Nation, 2021).

Even if you can't find the time to exercise, or the thought of it feels too much for where you're at, *any* physical activity can be useful to complete the stress cycle. I.e. When we are in fight or flight, we can use physical activity to signal to our brains that we have successfully survived a threat and now our body is safe again; simultaneously burning off cortisol and producing endorphins. Emily & Amelia Nagoski explain this beautifully in their book Burnout, Solve Your Stress Cycle - a must-read.

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Fuel your body

Eating varied, nutritious food regularly and avoiding skipping meals is going to fuel your brain and body. Registered associate nutritionist Georgie Kerr has loads of nutrient packed recipes to support you at any stage of your postnatal journey on her IG. She sent me her favourites below.

[Overnight Oats](#)

[Savoury Slice](#)

[Quick Lunch](#)

[Tomato Hake & Butterbean](#)

[Something Sweet](#)

Have a good kip

It goes without saying that 7-9 hours of sleep is the ideal, and we know poor sleep increases stress, anxiety, aggression and depression. But I understand how frustrating telling you to get more sleep is. So instead I'm going to share some tips to improve it.

Get outside as soon as possible after waking. Dr Samer Hattar (2021) suggests 5-30 minutes of viewing sunlight outside as soon as possible after waking not only boosts mood but also regulates our sleep-wake cycle.

Yoga Nidra – translates to 'Yogic Sleep' can be used to help you relax pre-sleep, or in the middle of the day instead of a nap. I found it transformational in the early days of motherhood when everyone was saying "sleep when the baby sleeps" but you don't have time to have a full nap. To find out more about it and its many benefits you can read an article written by Lauren at [mindworks meditation here](#). She's also recorded a blissful Yoga Nidra which you can access at the end of the article.



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Psychological strategies to boost well-being

Once you have recharged and refuelled your physical battery it will be much easier for your brain to take on board any work you do on your mind.

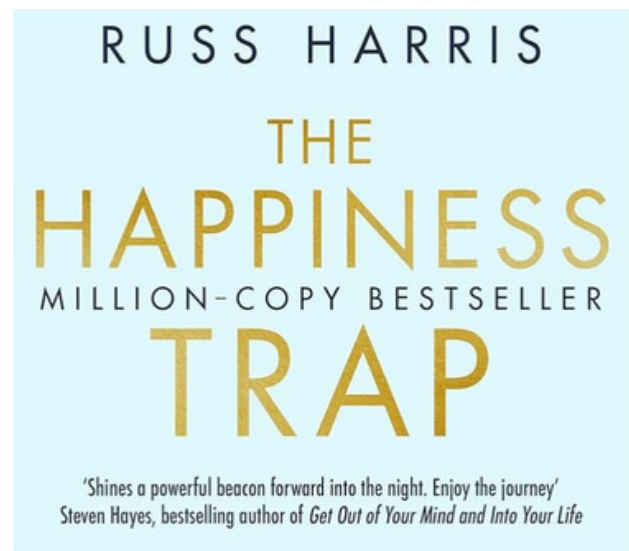
Unhook from unhelpful thoughts

One of the first things to be impacted when we are stressed, overwhelmed, anxious or approaching burnout is that our mind starts to race, we find it difficult to control our thoughts and they can become negative and critical.

Notice, Name & Thank:

- **Notice:** Noticing is a technique in which you simply 'notice' what is going on inside your mind and/ or body with curiosity in a non-judgmental way. E.g. you might notice that you have the thought "I'm no good at this" when your child has a tantrum.
- **Name:** By naming our thoughts we can distance ourselves from them and take an observer position. You can use the following ways to name your thoughts, either inside your head, or out loud: "I'm having the thought that/ my mind is telling me that/ I'm telling myself the story that..." Literally putting the extra words around the thought, allows us to 'unhook from it,' enabling us to see it as something temporary that will pass and thus reducing their ability to overtake us and influence our behaviour.
- **Thank:** Remember, that your brains primary job is to keep you safe and alive. Think of it as an overprotective friend in its attempts to do this. It can be helpful to thank it and let it know that you're actually safe: "Thanks mind, I know you're trying to keep safe but me and the baby are fine, we're safe".

All these techniques and concepts come from [The Happiness Trap](#) by Dr Russ Harris.



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Get curious about your consumption

A way of coping is to consume things that aren't helpful in order to numb out, escape or avoid e.g. alcohol, drugs, sweet and fatty foods and technology. Whilst these strategies aren't necessarily harmful in the short-term; when feelings are overwhelming, relying on them as long-term strategies is unlikely to be helpful. Even seemingly innocuous activities like scrolling may be contributing to our overwhelm as our already overloaded brains still have to process all that information.

Put a pin in perfectionism

Not only is trying to be the perfect parent unattainable but it is a really heavy weight and a sure fire way to burn out. It can be helpful to reflect on some of the standards we set in our parenting, where these originated from, and how we can meet them with compassion. One way to start thinking about this outside of the therapy room is to read [Parenting for Humans](#) by Dr Emma Svanberg. Remember, we just need to be a good enough parent.



Talk to a professional

If your feelings are interfering with your ability to function or feel any forms of pleasure it could be time to speak to your GP and/or a therapist. Even if you are worried you don't meet the criteria for a definition, seek support.

If you're thinking that you need that extra level of support I am always here - book in your free intro call [today](#).

The [Maternal Mental Health Alliance](#) have a list of great support services linked here and you can search by area or postcode.

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Social strategies to boost well-being

Now we've focused internally and built your mind and body back up again, it is important to look externally. We're a social species and are hard-wired to connect with others.

Connect with your co-parent

Having a baby can put a huge strain on our relationship. Sometimes differing schedules, priorities, work stresses and the division of labour in the family can cause resentments to build. Eve Rodsky's [Fair Play](#) provides some really helpful guidance on how to manage family life and approach co-parenting.

One way to boost affection and connection in your relationship is the "[six-second kiss](#)". Gottman, a relationship researcher, suggested we should kiss our partner every day for one, six-second kiss. The rationale being, six seconds feels like a long time to kiss someone you don't like, and far too long to kiss someone with whom you feel unsafe. Kissing for six seconds enables you to slow down and deliberately notice that you like, trust and feel affection for this person and it signals to your body that you are safe.

Other activities that help to complete your stress cycle and teach your body you are safe include hugging someone for 20 seconds, ensuring that you both support your own body weight, or petting an animal.

FAIR PLAY

'A hands-on guide for navigating the hot-button issues that so many families struggle with'

REESE WITHERSPOON



EVE RODSKY



Connect with someone or something that brings you joy

Whilst connecting to other humans is good, it doesn't have to be human connection that we seek; connecting with someone or something that brings us joy leads to the release of serotonin, which makes us feel content, bliss, trust, and comfort. That might be a pet, knitting, walking in nature, or playing the bagpipes.