

WHAT IT IS

Many of our students become overwhelmed when faced with multiple assignments, pressing deadlines, and trying to balance school, work, and life responsibilities. One of the things we can teach our students is how to gain control of their feelings of panic and dread and learn how to center themselves to focus on the tasks at hand. Some of this work involves controlling their breathing and physical reactions to stress. Another part is identifying what realistic worries and concerns they have in their life, and which are more unfounded concerns and outside of their control.

College students struggle to balance multiple tasks while keeping some semblance of sanity through the experience. Students learn how to balance aspects of their life (peers, academic, physical, dating relationships, family) throughout their time away from home as they move toward adulthood. Stress reduction programming should include some discussion of how to learn to “take a break” and identify the signs of early stress and burnout.

WHO TO USE IT WITH

Students who are overwhelmed and stuck in a fight, flight, or freeze response, which keeps them from taking positive action. These approaches are useful for students who have the skills and ability to problem solve but have become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tasks looming in front of them. These approaches work well with students who are feeling the pain and frustration of being stuck and who have a desire to try something different to be able to move forward.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. What are some of your fears and worries? Which do you have control over, and which do you not?
2. What keeps you from moving forward with a task when you feel overwhelmed? What are some sources of support you can lean into, such as friends, family, and support services on campus?
3. What are some tasks that you can focus on, have a clear objective, and may be challenging, but within your ability to complete?

TEACHING INSIGHTS

Examples of realistic fears

- I’m not ready for this test; I didn’t study enough
- I didn’t ask for enough for help

Examples of unfounded fears

- My instructor will think I’m dumb
- I’ll never learn this, it’s too hard

Share these concepts with your students

- Take small, consistent, measurable steps
- See obstacles as part of the process
- Focus on your behavior (fake it to make it)
- Use the support of those around you
- See change as a process, not a destination

CYCLE BREATHING

An approach called “cycle” or “box” breathing is useful in reducing the biological changes that overcome a person when they climb through the escalation toward crisis.

The process of cycle breathing involves breathing in for a slow count of 4, holding your breath for a slow count of 4, breathing out for a slow count of 4, and then repeating. This process lowers blood pressure and heart rate, allowing the student to regain calm and their ability to think creatively and rationally about their stress.