

BETTER LEARNING PROGRAM I

# **Increasing Learning Capacity among Pupils in Ongoing Crises**

Manual for Improving Self-Regulation:  
Classroom Sessions



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Living in an ongoing crisis situation is at times extremely hard. As teachers, we would like to help you when your body and mind are taken over by fear, leaving you in a tired and exhausted state with a reduced capacity for learning. There are ways to deal with this so you can feel better. We cannot change what happened or what is happening in the conflict, but together we can try to change the way you think, feel and deal with it. We will teach you coping techniques to better control your body and reduce the stress so you can concentrate better and learn more at school.

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# How to Use this Manual

## Teaching coping techniques

The manual is written for teachers working under the extreme and hard conditions of an emergency situation. The goal is to present a set of stabilizing exercises that can help students cope with stress. The exercises are easy to perform and fit naturally into regular teaching. When the pupils know how to perform the calming techniques they should be encouraged to choose their own combination of exercises and practise them under stressful situations: at school when feeling stressed or when they have lost concentration, at home before going to bed, when waking up after a nightmare or after being exposed to a scary event.

Teachers have a crucial role to play in helping pupils cope with stress and trauma, by creating a nurturing learning environment where pupils are given the chance to share their challenges and their feelings with their teachers. Through this manual, we aim to equip teachers with easy ways of providing psychosocial support.

The goal of teaching coping techniques is to give therapeutic benefits that can promote learning capacity. Teaching coping techniques can provide the pupils with therapeutic benefits that promote learning by:

Establishing a sense of stability and safety:

This is necessary to reduce an ongoing feeling of fear and anxiety. It can be achieved by establishing normal routines like going to school and focusing on education / learning to discriminate among indications of danger / knowing that yesterday was dangerous but all days are not dangerous / using coping skills and being able to receive social support from classmates, teachers, parents and family.

Calming and self-regulation:

This can be achieved by using a variety of coping techniques such as breathing exercises and deep muscle relaxation. When exposed to danger it is natural to be activated and react – these are normal reactions to abnormal situations. When living in ongoing crises it is important to get assistance to handle overwhelming emotions, be able to identify stress reactions and manage to calm down when the situation once again is safe.

Increasing community belief and self-belief:

This is about strengthening the sense of belonging by knowing how, where and when to ask for help and being able to give help to others. It is of great importance for maintaining good mental health that the pupils are able to have a sense of control over positive outcomes in their lives. The pupil should learn and experience that her/his actions can lead to positive outcomes. The same goes for strengthening the belief of the school's and the community's ability to help a pupil in distress.

In chapter 2 we give examples of five short practical sessions containing calming and tension releasing exercises. In chapter 3 we present four sessions of about 45 minutes with knowledge about the connection between body and mind and how the pupils can identify and control their reactions. The educational goals of the Better Learning Program, level 1 are listed below.

## **Educational Goals**

Target group

Better Learning Program 1 (BLP-1) is written for all pupils in ongoing emergency and post-emergency contexts, where students have experienced stressful or potentially traumatizing events. The sessions are developed for pupils aged 10–16 years, but the intervention can easily be adapted to both lower and higher age groups.

Overall goal

Integrate coping techniques in the teaching in order to reduce stress and improve learning:

- Establish a sense of stability and safety
- Promote calming and the ability for self-regulation



- Increase community- and self-belief: where to find support and help, how to give and how to receive support and help.

### Understand

The theoretical sessions should help the pupils understand that:

- Stressful reactions are normal reactions in a dangerous situation.
- Body and mind are connected: a relaxed body cannot be attached to a frightened brain. This means that if you can make your body relax, your mind will automatically become more relaxed as well. You can control your reactions by using different ways of “talking” to your brain.
- Stress reactions become less scary when you know how to deal with them and talk about them to a trusted person.
- It is necessary to practise the relaxation exercises over time to experience a positive effect.
- It is important to continue discussing progress with the teacher, classmates and family members.

### Coping strategies

The sessions introduce ways of reducing stress by “talking” to your brain and to your body. The ways of talking are:

- Relaxation exercises
- Breathing techniques
- Self-instruction

### Desired outcome

Throughout the sessions the pupils should familiarize themselves with different exercises:

- Encourage the pupils to find their own personal combination of exercises and techniques that can be employed to reduce stress at school, before going to bed and when waking up from a nightmare.



# Practical Sessions: Learning Exercises

In this chapter we present examples of five practical sessions containing exercises that aim at reducing stress and increasing awareness, attention and concentration. Relaxation is necessary because stress often manifests itself as physical tension and the feeling of chaos.

Each session takes less than 15 minutes. The sessions can be incorporated into the daily classroom schedule, either at the beginning of the school day or during the ordinary teaching lessons when attention or energy begins to wane. All exercises may be done while the students are sitting or standing next to their desks. Students should be informed that these exercises are carried out in class in order to reduce their stress symptoms and improve their concentration and learning.

The practical sessions presented below are intended as examples that hopefully will encourage teachers to make use of appropriate exercises they already know. The exercises are organized into the following categories:

- Relaxation exercises (tense and release, and safe place)
- Breathing exercises
- Concentration and balance exercises
- Tension-relieving exercises

## Guidelines for the teacher

The exercises presented below could be grouped together in different ways according to preference and desired purpose. In other words, you can pick whatever exercise you want. Nevertheless, we suggest that the sessions should last approximately

10–15 minutes and consist of two to four exercises that work well together. Make sure to teach the students a mixture of exercises from all the above-mentioned categories. Each session should be repeated, preferably once a day, until the students have a generally good idea of how to perform the exercises. In order to explain the content and purpose of each exercise carefully, some of the instructions are rather detailed. When instructing the students in class, however, you should use your own words. The instructions should be short and precise so that the students can focus their attention on performing the exercises.

Make sure that the pupils are presented with at least ten different exercises that they practise in class and as homework. We suggest that you assign students tasks of leading the class when practising exercises they are familiar with. Encourage the students to choose their favourites and to tell the class the reason why they like them, when they perform the exercises, and how they feel when doing them.

## Examples of five exercise sequences: sessions A–E

### Session A

Introduction	<p>In the next weeks we are going to learn a new language. It is an almost silent language, very few words are used. We are going to use our bodies to communicate to our brains. That way we can relax better and calm ourselves when we are stressed. The reason why we can use our bodies to communicate with the brain is because the body and the brain are connected. You probably knew that already, but now you are going to learn how to effectively talk to your brain to calm yourself when feeling tense and stressed.</p> <p>Body and mind are connected: a relaxed body cannot be attached to a frightened brain. This means that if you can make your body relax, your mind will automatically become more relaxed as well. You can control your reactions by using different ways of talking to your brain. One way of talking to your brain is by performing different exercises:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relaxation exercises</li> <li>- Breathing exercises</li> <li>- Concentration and balance exercises</li> <li>- Tension-relieving exercises</li> </ul>
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	<p>These are highly effective exercises, and many of them have been used by people for thousands of years to calm down. They won't work immediately. You have to practise them for a while before they start working. Therefore we will spend 15 minutes every day over the coming weeks to practise until we become experts. Then you can choose your favourite exercises. Find out which of the techniques are most effective in talking to and calming down your brain when you feel stressed.</p> <p>This is going to be fun, but having fun is not the only reason we are learning these exercises. When you feel stressed your brain is not ready for learning. The exercises will help you reduce the stress and improve your learning capacity. When you are calm and happy you learn better! When you learn the exercises well, they may also help you sleep better.</p>
Tense and release	<p><i>The first exercise: Tense and release</i> is a relaxation exercise that releases muscular tension.</p> <p>Demonstrate how the pupils can create tension in the various muscle groups and ask them to copy what you do. Apply high tension to the different muscle groups for approximately 5 seconds before you release. Instruct the students to focus their attention on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. This is essential to increase body awareness. Once the students have familiarized themselves with this exercise, there is no need for a detailed instruction – simply do it. See instruction below.</p>
Belly breathing	<p><i>The second exercise: Belly breathing</i> is a simple tool for managing stress and anxiety.</p> <p>This exercise teaches you to breathe deeply with your stomach instead of taking quick, shallow breaths from your chest. Inhale through the nose and expand the belly as much as you can, like a balloon. Exhale, preferably through the nose, and let all the air out of the balloon. When your mind wanders, just gently bring your attention back to the belly breathing. See instruction below.</p>

### Tense and release

I am going to lead you through some of the major muscle groups of the body, asking you to tense and release them, one by one. This technique has proved to be very effective in relaxing the body. First, we are going to focus on the hands and arms, before moving on to the face, neck, shoulders, stomach, legs and feet. When doing this relaxation exercise, I would like you to concentrate on the sensations

you will experience in the muscles. Focus your awareness on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation.

Get into a comfortable position. You can either have your eyes open or closed. Take a few deep, gentle breaths. Breathe in through your nose, letting the air fill your lungs. Then slowly breathe out through your nose or mouth. As you breathe in, imagine you are gathering up all of your worries and tensions. As you breathe out, imagine that these stressful feelings are flowing out of your body. Notice how your feet are touching the floor. Feel the chair underneath you.

First focus your awareness on the **hands and arms**. Clench your fists as hard as you can. Hold it. (Apply tension for about 5 seconds.) Feel how tense it is. Now relax. Let the tension go. Notice how it feels when the tension leaves your hands and forearms. Now, tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up towards your shoulders as though you were lifting a heavy weight. Feel the tension in your muscles. Hold it ... and then relax. Let the tension disappear. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. Tighten your triceps – the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms – by holding your arms out straight in front of you and locking your elbows. Make sure your muscles are really tense. Feel the tension in the back of your upper arms. Hold ... and then relax. Keep breathing steadily; with each breath out, a little more tension leaves your body.

Next I would like you to focus your attention on your **facial muscles**, starting with the forehead. Lift your eyebrows as high as possible. Feel the tension ... and relax. Let the tension flow out. Feel the wrinkles being smoothed. Now clench your eyes tightly shut and wrinkle your nose. Feel the tension. Hold... and relax. Focus your attention on your jaw. Clench your teeth and pull back the corners of your mouth. Feel the tension in your jaw. Hold ... and relax. Release the jaw muscles. Feel the tension fading.

Now become aware of your **neck and shoulders**. First, tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by making a double chin, keep your chin in to your chest and press your head back. Hold ... and then relax. Notice how the tension leaves your neck. Now hunch your shoulders up as though you were going to touch your ears. Feel the tension around your shoulders and neck. Hold it, register the sensation ... and relax. Let the shoulders drop and continue to drop as the tension ebbs away. Next, bring your attention to your shoulder blades. Push them back so that they get nearer to each other. Feel them being gently squeezed together ... and then relax. Let the muscles soften. Notice the difference between the tension and relaxation.

Next, focus on your **stomach**. Make your stomach really hard and tense by pulling it in as far as you can. Feel the tension. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.

Focus your attention on your **legs and feet**. Hold your legs straight out in front of you, locked at the knee, and keep your toes up in the air. Tense your legs as much as you can while tightening your buttocks. Feel the tension in your shinbones, calves, thighs and buttocks. Notice what it feels like. Hold it ... and then relax. Notice the relief, how the tension has left you. Last, focus your attention on your toes. Curl your toes down. Feel the tension in the sole of your foot and the calf of your leg. Then ... relax. Let it go. Feel the tension leaving you.

Finally, I would like you to tense your **entire body**, feeling tension in your arms and hands, face, neck, shoulders, stomach, legs and feet. Hold it ... and then relax. Now your whole body should feel relaxed. Keep breathing steadily. With each breath out, you feel a little more relaxed. The tension is leaving your body. You feel heavy, relaxed, calm and warm. This exercise will soon be over. Feel the floor underneath your feet. Notice the parts of your body that are touching the chair. Move your arms and legs. Gently stretch your limbs. When you are ready, open your eyes and let this exercise come to an end.

*The short version:* You can also do a short version of tense and release by standing with your hands out in front of you and tensing your entire body. Tighten all the muscles for about 5 seconds. Then rest for 10 seconds and repeat three or four times.

### Belly breathing

When we feel nervous, scared or angry we often take quick, shallow breaths. Breathing like this can make us feel dizzy and out of breath. One way to calm and relax the body is by controlling our breathing. When you breathe in, the stomach should get bigger; when you breathe out, the stomach should slowly fall inwards again.

Now, let us focus our attention on how we breathe, placing one hand on the stomach and the other on the chest. Slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth. You should be breathing at a tempo that you find comfortable. Notice whether your stomach is rising slightly as you breathe in and lowering again as you breathe out. Try to direct the breath downwards into the stomach, rather than breathing with your chest. You should not force the movement. The stomach should gently swell and sink, like a wave, when you

breathe in and out. This way of breathing is not easy – it takes practise. You may find it helpful to imagine that a balloon is inside your stomach. As you breathe in, air travels down to fill the balloon, making the stomach swell. As you breathe out, the balloon is emptied, causing the stomach to sink back in. When your mind wanders, just gently bring your attention back to the belly breathing. Remember that whenever you feel scared or restless, taking deep breaths from the stomach will help calm and relax the body.

It may be easier to take deep breaths from the stomach when lying down on the floor. If there is enough space in the classroom, the students can lie down on their backs. Have them place an object on their stomachs. Ask them if they can make the object move up and down while breathing in and out. Be aware that some students find it threatening to lie down, though. Pay attention, and do not force students to do anything they find uncomfortable.

#### Session B

Safe place	<p><i>Safe place</i> is a relaxation technique in which you use your imagination to create a place where you can feel safe, relaxed and happy. This visualization technique helps create distraction from stressful thoughts. It is a connection between what you imagine and how you feel. You can control which images to focus on in your mind. Therefore you can make conscious attempts to control how you feel. Whenever feeling anxious, upset, miserable, or scared, you can use this technique to calm and secure yourself. You may find it hard to create images of a safe place the first time you try. However, the more you practise going to a safe place, the easier you will find it.</p> <p>Encourage the pupils to use all sensory modalities. Read the instructions below with a calm voice, and pace the instructions to allow the pupils to use their imagination. Afterwards you should ask the pupils what they imagined. The first time you introduce this exercise, give the pupils the opportunity to draw their safe place. See instruction below.</p>
Humming bee breath	<p>This is a breathing technique that helps relax a busy mind, making it easier to concentrate. On breathing out, make a deep humming sound while plugging the ears. Focus the attention on the humming sound and the vibration it causes. Repeat the exercise five times before unplugging your ears. See instruction below.</p>



## Safe place

We are going to use our imagination to find a scene or place that makes you feel safe, comfortable and happy. This could be a real place you have been to where you felt good and were in control, or it could be a place from your imagination or a picture that you have seen. (Suggest some examples that are relevant to the community in which the students live.)

Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes or look at the tip of your shoes. Take a few deep, steady breaths. Bring up a picture of a place where you feel secure, calm and happy. Imagine that you are standing or sitting there. Can you see yourself there? In your imagination, take a look around. What do you see? What can you see close to you? Look at the details of it and see what it is made of. Notice the different colours. Imagine reaching out and touching it. How does it feel? Now take a look further away. What can you see around you? See what's in the distance. Try to see the different colours and shapes and shadows. This is your special place and you can imagine whatever you want to be there. When you're there, you feel calm and peaceful. Imagine your bare feet on the ground. What does the ground feel like? Walk around slowly, trying to notice the things there. Try to see what they look like and how they feel; what can you hear? Maybe the gentle sounds of the wind, or birds or the sea. Can you feel the warm sun on your face? What can you smell? Maybe it's the sea air, or flowers or your favourite food cooking? In your special place, you can see the things you want, and imagine touching and smelling them, and hearing pleasant sounds. As your mind becomes more peaceful, your body will also lose some of its tension. You feel calm and happy.

Now imagine that someone special is with you in your place. This is someone who is there to be a good friend and to help you, someone strong and kind. He or she is there just to help you and look after you. Imagine walking around and exploring your special place slowly with this person. You feel happy to be together. This person is your helper and he or she is good at sorting out problems.

Just look around in your imagination once more. Have a good look. Remember that this is your special place. It will always be there. You can always imagine being here when you want to feel calm and secure and happy. Your helpers will always be there whenever you want them to be. Now get ready to open your eyes and leave your special place for now. You can come back when you want to. Gradually become aware of your surroundings here and now. Notice the chair underneath

you and feel your feet touching the ground. Gently move and stretch your limbs. In your own time open your eyes. As you do so, you feel calm, relaxed and happy.

### Humming bee breath

In this exercise we are going to make a deep humming sound, like that of a bee. Sit comfortably on the chair. Feel your feet on the floor, and make sure that your spine and head are straight. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose. Before breathing out, use your fingers to close your ears. Hold your elbows out to the side so that your chest is open. Make sure that your lips are closed, your teeth slightly apart, and your jaws relaxed throughout the exercise. Make a humming sound while exhaling. Concentrate on the sound and the vibration it causes. Exhale completely and repeat the exercise five times before unplugging your ears.

Below you will find suggestions for three more sessions. After the boxes you find descriptions of these exercises as well as a few more.

### Session C

Revitalizing breath	Breathing exercise that coordinates breath and movement to open the shoulders and chest, decrease tension in the neck, induce relaxation, and deepen the breathing.
The palm tree	Balance exercise to enhance concentration and bring the pupil into the present moment. It stretches the entire body and strengthens the legs.
Standing side stretch	Exercise that relieves tension, lengthening the sides of the body and expanding the rib cage.
Standing spine twist	Exercise to relieve tension in the back and neck and improve rotation.

### Session D

Tree pose	Balance exercise that enhances concentration, stretches the entire body and strengthens the legs.
Shake it loose	Movement exercise to release tension in the whole body.
Feeling the sounds through the back	Exercise to increase awareness of both breath and back. It can also create a feeling of connectedness.

Session E

Spinal flex	Exercise to release tension in the back and the stomach.
Forward bend	Relaxing pose that calms the mind, releases tension in the neck and shoulders and stretches the lower back.
Side stretch	Tension-relieving exercise that lengthens the sides of the body and expands the rib cage.
Left nostril breathing	Breathing exercise that induces tranquility and calmness.

### Concentration and balance exercises

The four exercises described aim at increasing concentration and balance and it also help bringing the pupil into the present moment, being here and now. Body and mind are connected. Good physical balance can affect mental and emotional balance, and emotional distress can equally alter and decrease the body balance. By practising these exercises you can gradually restore some of your inner balance. But remember, it takes a lot of practise to be in balance.



Palm pose



Tree pose



Eagle pose



Balancing pose

Remember to breathe through your stomach while standing in these positions. When the students master the balance they can close their eyes, making the balance even harder.

## Tension-relieving exercises

Stress can manifest as physical tension and somatic pain. These exercises aim to release tension in the neck, shoulders, stomach, back and the whole body. When the students have learned an exercise, they should be encouraged to coordinate movements with breath. Ideally, they should breathe in and out through the nose. If some of the students find nasal breathing hard, they could breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.

### Shake it loose

The exercise we are about to do now is great for releasing tension in our bodies. You are going to shake your whole body for a few minutes (3–10 minutes), from your feet through your knees, hips, and shoulders, to your head. Stand comfortably. Bend your knees slightly and relax your shoulders. If you want to, you can close your eyes. If you have trouble with balance you may need to keep your eyes open. Take a few deep breaths.

Start shaking from the feet up through your knees. Remember to keep your knees bent. Let the shaking move up through your hips and your shoulders. Let your whole body shake, feeling the energies moving up from your feet. Keep your knees bent. Remember to breathe. Let your shoulders be loose. Keep going. Keep shaking. Keep your knees bent. Let your shoulders go. Let your head go. If the mind wanders, bring your attention back to shaking. Let your jaw hang open. We carry a lot of tension in the jaw, the neck, the shoulders, the hips, the knees, the wrists and hands. Your whole body should be shaking now. Keep going – keep shaking. If you want to stop, shake even more. Let the shaking loosen up tensions in your whole body. Let the head go. Let the jaw be open. If sounds come, just let them come. Your whole body is shaking. Keep going.

Now stop... Stand still and pay attention to how your body feels. Breathe deeply. Feel the effect of this shaking exercise. If you have your eyes closed, gradually open them.

### Shoulder shrugs

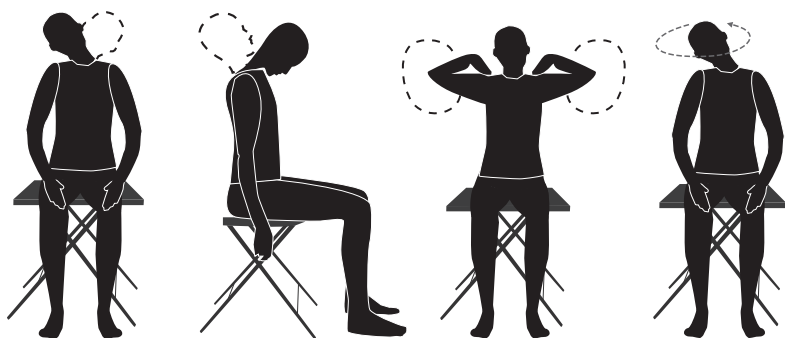
Sit upright in the chair with your arms hanging down at your sides. As you inhale, lift the shoulders up to touch the ears. Let the shoulders drop down as you exhale. Find a speed that is comfortable for you so that you can inhale and exhale at an even pace. Continue for 1–2 minutes. This exercise could also be done standing next to the desk.

## Elbow circles

Sit comfortably on the chair with your spine straight. Bend your elbows and touch your shoulders with your fingers. Stretch your arms out to the side at shoulder level. Start moving your elbows around in small circles. Breathe in as you rotate the elbows forward and up. Breathe out as you continue to roll the shoulders to the back and down. Gradually, make the circles bigger and bigger until the tips of the elbows touch in front. After a while, reverse the direction. Now, inhale as you roll the shoulders up and back, and exhale as you roll the shoulders down and to the front. Again, begin with small circles that gradually become bigger and bigger. Remember to coordinate breathing with the movements throughout the exercise. When finished, shake loose.

## Neck movement

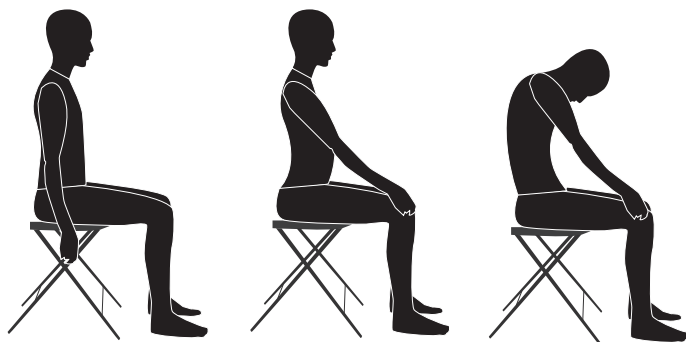
Slowly tilt the head to the left and bring the left ear towards the left shoulder. To intensify the stretch on the right side of your neck, you can place the left hand on the top of your head and gently pull it towards the side. However, do not force the ear to touch the shoulder. Hold the position for three breaths and then slowly lift the head back to centre. Then tilt the head to the right, trying to bring the right ear towards the right shoulder. You can gently pull your head towards the side with your right hand. Again, hold for a few breaths without forcing the ear to touch the shoulder. Another tension-relieving neck exercise is to slowly rotate your head. After several circles, gently reverse the direction.



Head and shoulder poses

## Spinal flex

This exercise relieves tension in the back and the stomach. Sit on the edge of the chair, and place your feet flat on the floor. The spine should be erect, shoulders down and relaxed, and head centered between the shoulders. Place your hands on your thighs, palms down. Inhale as you press the lower spine forward, pulling the chest forward. Exhale as you arch the spine back, pushing back with the navel centre. Feel the stretch in your back. Try to keep the head straight throughout the exercise. Continue rhythmically for 1–3 minutes. Remember to coordinate the breath with the movements. You can also do this exercise on the floor, like a cat stretching its back.



## Standing spine twist

Stand with your feet firmly on the ground. Breathe in through the nose as you stretch the arms out to the sides at shoulder level. On breathing out, turn your head and look over your left shoulder. While breathing in return to centre with your arms stretched out to the sides. On breathing out, twist to the right. Inhale and return to centre with arms stretched out to the sides at shoulder level. Find a tempo that feels comfortable and repeat five to ten times. Be sure to coordinate movements with breath.



### Forward bend

Sit on the edge of your chair with your feet placed firmly on the ground. Bend forward while breathing out, placing your elbows on your inner thighs and the palms of your hands on the floor. Place your belly between your legs. Let your head rest between the knees. Close your eyes and stay in this position for a few moments. With each exhalation, let your head release more towards your feet. Notice how the tension in your neck ebbs away. When you are ready, breathe in and slowly return to an upright position. Sit with your eyes closed for a few moments and experience the effects of this exercise.



### Side stretch

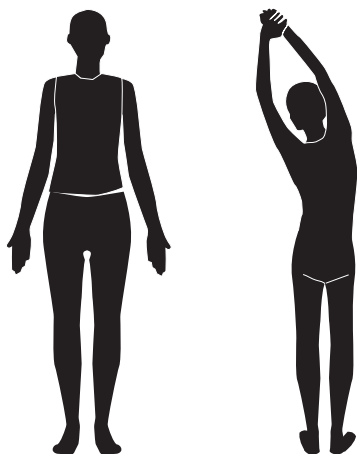
Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor and your arms hanging down at your sides. Place your right hand under the chair seat. Raise your left arm straight up into the air above your head and gradually stretch over to the right side. Keep both hips on the chair seat at all times. Keep your neck and shoulders relaxed. Hold the stretch for three breaths and feel the entire left side of your upper body lengthen. Sit up again with arms relaxed down by your sides. Repeat the side stretch to the left raising your right arm over your head. Hold the position for three breaths before returning to the starting position.



### Standing side stretch

Get into a standing position next to your desk. Take a moment to feel the ground below your feet. Breathe in while raising your arms above your head. Take a firm grip around your left wrist. On exhalation, gently pull your left arm over your head, bending towards the right side. Continue breathing steadily while standing in this position for a few moments. Notice the stretch on your left side. Return to centre on inhalation with both arms high in the air. Now take a grip around your right wrist to gently pull your right arm over your head to the left side. Be aware of the stretch on your right side as you continue to breathe deeply in and out. When

you are ready, return to centre and release your arms to your sides. Stand for a few moments and notice the effects of this exercise.



### Rotating and swinging arms

This exercise aims to release tension in the body. Start by standing up with enough space so you can swing your arms around freely. Make sure that your feet are firmly planted on the floor. Your feet should be pointing straight ahead throughout the exercise, and your knees should be slightly bent. Start rotating your upper body from side to side, turning your hips left and right. Allow your arms to swing effortlessly from side to side. Gradually twist more vigorously until your fists tap your shoulder and higher up your back. While rotating, ensure that you move your head from side to side, looking over your shoulder. Continue for some minutes before gradually slowing your rotating to a stop.

## Breathing exercises

Breathing is something we do automatically, without thinking. However, we can control the breath and use it consciously to lower levels of stress and anxiety. Breathing exercises can be of use when students are overactive, tired or stressed. These exercises aim to increase breathing awareness, relaxing the body, and calming the mind.

It is important to remember that breathing should occur at the natural pace of the individual and never be strained or forced. Nasal breathing is preferred, but if



the students find it hard to breathe in and out through the nose, they can breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Students should be informed to end the breathing exercise if they experience dizziness. Hyperventilation, or overbreathing, is a condition in which one breathes too quickly or deeply. If a student starts hyperventilating, instruct him or her to concentrate on breathing out rather than breathing in, trying to exhale until all the air is out of the lungs.

#### Left nostril breathing

Sit in a comfortable position with your back straight. In this exercise, breathing is done through the left nostril only. Use the thumb or index finger of your right arm to close the right nostril. Softly inhale and exhale through the left nostril. Make sure that there is no sound as the air passes through the nostril. Breathing should be slow, effortless, rhythmic and deep. If any dizziness or discomfort is experienced then either shorten the duration of each inhalation and exhalation, or discontinue the exercise. Continue breathing for 1–5 minutes.

#### Feeling the sounds through your back

Divide the class into pairs, and instruct partners to sit back to back, either on the floor or on chairs. Ask the children how their backs feel when they sit this way. Encourage them to pay attention to what happens to their backs when they breathe in and out. Ask one partner to sing, talk or experiment with various sounds. Encourage the other partner to identify where in the back s/he can feel the sound, and what it feels like? Then change roles.



Back-to-back breathing

### Revitalizing breath

Stand steadily on the floor. Notice that the entire soles of your feet are in connection with the ground. Breathe in through your nose while slowly raising your arms straight above your head. Keep your eyes on your hands, slightly tilting your head back when your arms are in the air. Breathe out through your nose (or mouth) as you gently lower your arms to shoulder level and stretch them out to the side with palms facing up. Also lower your head slightly and fix your stare straight ahead. Inhale as you raise your arms up over your head again, and tilt your head back fixating your eyes on your hands. On exhalation, gradually lower your arms in front of you, coming back to the opening position with your head in a neutral position. This is one round. Repeat ten times and remember to coordinate your breath with the movements. Feel the movement in your neck.

### Paint the room

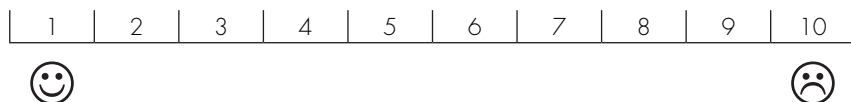
Stand firmly on the floor. Imagine that you have a bucket of paint in front of you. Pretend to hold a paintbrush using both hands. First choose a colour that makes you feel happy. Start painting the wall to your left up towards the ceiling, then the ceiling, and finally the wall to your right down towards the floor. As you move up, breathe in through your nose. As you move down, breathe out through your nose (or mouth) and bend your knees slightly so they are soft. Do this three times. Then you can change colours and reverse the direction. How does it feel in your body?

### Why practising breathing procedures?

Breathing happens automatically. The brain regulates our breathing depending on how much oxygen the body needs at any given time. However, breathing can also be controlled and used consciously in order to gain physiological relaxation. This is because breathing is directly linked to the bodily system controlling physiological arousal. When we feel nervous, scared or angry we sometimes take quick, shallow breaths. Taking deep breaths from the stomach rather than breathing from the chest has a calming effect on the mind and body. And when you calm your body you calm your brain. You can measure the change in your calmness by indicating your level of calmness before and after using the scale from 1 to 10.

**Introducing the scale from 1 to 10:** The pupils should indicate how they feel right now on this scale. The more relaxed and calm one feels in both body and

mind, the lower the score should be. The more anxious and afraid one feels, the higher the score on the scale. The scale is used to raise awareness among pupils about how they feel and how the various techniques may help relax both the body and the mind. Before you do the exercises in class everyone should find out where they are on the scale. Then compare where you are after the exercises. When the exercises work, there should be a drop in the scale.



*Remember:*

Help the students focus their attention on how it feels in the body while performing the exercises as well as experiencing the effects afterwards. Encourage the students to put their experiences into words. Examples of different answers showing that the pupils have focused inwards, include:

- I can feel tension in my shoulders.
- My heart beats fast.
- It's like my body is lighter.
- My heart beats slower.
- I can hear my breath, it is calm.

Try to make the sessions into routines and rituals at school:

- Start the school day with a session.
- Use the scale from 1–10 before and after the exercises.
- Start the session with a song.
- Use the relaxation, calming and tension-relieving exercises frequently.

Challenge the pupils to explain which exercise they like the best and why:

- Why do you like this particular exercise?
- What is your favorite combination of exercises?

Homework:

- It can be fun to give the pupils nontraditional homework such as performing *tense and release*, breathing exercises and *safe place* before they go to bed.



# **Theoretical Sessions: Understanding the Connection Between Body and Mind**

Now it is time to teach the students what it means when the body and mind are said to be connected – and how they can actively use this knowledge to calm themselves down. They have to understand that a relaxed body cannot be attached to a frightened brain. This means that if you can make your body relax, your mind will automatically become more relaxed as well. You can control your reactions by using the different ways of “talking” to your brain. Ways of talking to your brain include using the different practical exercises you have been learning: safe place / tense and release / breathing techniques and also self-instruction by talking out loud (e.g. telling yourself that “it is safe now” and “I can relax”). These are different ways to calm yourself and make you able to regulate your inner feelings, thoughts and stress.

Identify the reactions and understand that they are normal reactions to an abnormal situation.

## **Body and mind are connected:**

When you feel scared, you are afraid of something that might have happened years ago. This is because your brain is confused and tells your body that there is danger now. This is not right. It is like an alarm is turned on in your brain signaling to your body that you are in danger. You can change this, by turning off the alarm. You can tell your brain that you are safe now, that you can relax, and that there is no reason to be afraid.

This chapter focuses on the content of four sessions. The sessions should be carried out preferably within two weeks. The following information should be given to the pupils:

- We will show you methods to help you sleep better and concentrate better in school so that you can learn more effectively.
- Each of the four sessions lasts about 45 minutes.

*The workbook:* Every pupil should have a workbook, pencil and crayons to colour the drawings, to make a simple drawing of their favourite calming exercises and to write down examples of how they can talk to their brain.

## Session 1: Stressful events and reactions

**Goals:** Introduction: Make it clear that these four sessions are about learning to cope with stress in order to achieve better learning at school. Motivate the class to be engaged in all four sessions. Establish a theme song; learn about stressful events and the stress reactions they might cause.

**Tools:** Blackboard and personal workbooks.

**Time:** About 45 minutes.

<b>Introduction &amp; motivation</b>	<b>Min</b> 5	<p>In these four sessions we are going to learn how to improve our learning. We will learn about what can damage and disturb our capacity for learning. One of the worst threats to learning is a stressful reaction. Stressful reactions are caused by overwhelming experiences.</p> <p>We will talk about the following in class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is a stressful event and what are expected reactions?</li> <li>- How can you recognise them?</li> <li>- Learn different ways to calm yourself.</li> <li>- Learn how to help each other.</li> </ul> <p>But first we will talk about how we can feel a sense of safety in the classroom in order to make it easier to talk about stressful reactions – we need some rules.</p>
<b>Rules for the sessions</b>	10	<p><i>Establish rules together with the pupils:</i> Because we will be working together as a team, we need some rules. Any suggestions? Discuss with the group; if they do not address the subject of confidentiality, you should: Confidentiality: Outside the</p>

		<p>sessions, you should talk to others only about yourself, not the other group members. The same goes for the teacher. The teachers are not allowed to tell others what you say unless they have your permission. If the things you reveal are of such a nature that the teachers are obliged to inform other professionals, they cannot do so without telling you.</p> <p><i>Select a theme song:</i> we select a song we can sing together. Any suggestions?</p> <p><i>Explanations:</i> The reason we do this is because singing can help us relax and calm down. When singing we concentrate and can distract ourselves from fear and distressing thoughts. Singing together can be fun and make us feel that we are classmates and friends. Having friends can make us relax when we are afraid.</p>
<b>Stressful reactions</b>	10	<p><i>Ask the class:</i> What kind of stressful reactions have you experienced?</p> <p><i>Make a list of the reactions on the blackboard.</i></p> <p><i>Ask the class:</i> can you tell about the reactions; how does it feel in your body. Where in the body can you feel it? How and when do the reactions appear?</p> <p>The better we can understand the signals, the better we can control our body.</p>
<b>Stressful events &amp; normalization</b>	10	<p><i>Ask the class:</i> What kind of events could cause stressful reactions?</p> <p><i>Make a list on the blackboard.</i></p> <p>Discuss the list, and point out that the worst events are the ones of a potentially life-threatening nature; they are called traumatic events and may cause strong symptoms such as nightmares.</p> <p>Point out that it is common and normal to experience these kinds of reactions after being exposed to stressful and overwhelming events. You are not “crazy” when you have such reactions and not the only one to experience these.</p> <p>Point out the differences between traumatic events and stressful events. When we talk about <i>traumatic events</i> we think of the extreme experiences that you experience or witness when you are afraid you will die: air attack, shooting, threats ...</p>

<b>Reminders</b>	10	<p>Traumatic events differ from other events by sometimes causing re-experiencing. Sometimes it is small things that suddenly can make you react, and sometimes it is not even possible to recognize them. Reminders make you feel like it is happening again here and now. Re-experiencing makes you want to avoid anything that reminds you of the traumatic event.</p> <p><i>Ask the class:</i> What sorts of reminders (actions and things) can cause re-experience?  <i>Make a list on the blackboard.</i> Remember they can be different kinds of sensation: sound, touch, smell etc.</p>
<b>What helps?</b>	5	<p><i>Ask the class:</i> What makes you calm down when experiencing stressful reactions? Make a list on the blackboard.</p>
<b>Closure</b>	5	<p>Remember to end the session with inducing hope. Sum up the techniques and how we can understand how our body works and what makes inner stress. End the session with a song; thank the pupils for participating and respecting each other.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Thank you:</i> for chairing your thoughts with the class.</li> <li>- <i>Homework:</i> Practise safe place and breathing exercises before you start doing your homework and before you go to sleep.</li> <li>- <i>Next session:</i> will be (time and place) and we will talk about how the body and mind are connected.</li> <li>- <i>Sing your theme song.</i></li> </ul>

*Theme song:* A lot of inner stress make us lose the feeling of being present and connected to our body. By using songs with movement and dance we strengthen our body awareness. They offer a break from stressful thoughts and muscle tension, and also provide fun and strengthened social interaction. Rhythms can increase feelings of relaxation by stabilizing the heart rhythm.

## Session 2: Body and mind are connected

**Goals:** Understand the connection between body and mind. Learn the different ways they influence each other, how an alarmed brain can give false feelings and bodily tension while you in reality are safe.

**Tools:** The private workbook and crayons.

**Time:** About 45 minutes.



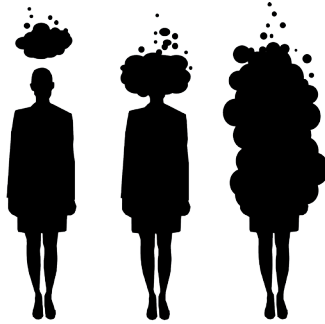
<b>Opening the session</b>	<b>Min</b> 5	Sing the theme song. Start with tense and release, and a breathing exercise. What do you remember from the last session?
<b>Talking to your brain</b>	10	<p><i>Why should we talk to our brain?</i> We want to take back the control we have when we are feeling safe, calm or happy. When a frightening situation occurs, or you are in danger, your body is in survival mode. This means you will be extra alert for anything and everything that seems to be a potential risk. It is a great survival system activated in the back of your brain. After the dangerous situation is over, the brain and body need to calm down. The alarm has to be turned off. Sometimes this does not happen by itself. This can be quite troublesome; it is hard to concentrate and hard to sleep without having nightmares. It can be difficult to eat because you lack appetite. Sometimes it is even hard being with friends because the alarm system in our brain has taken control. We can do some activities and “talk to your brain”. It is easier to have positive thoughts and feelings when we are calm.</p> <p><i>Talking to the brain:</i> When the alarm is not turned off by itself, you have to help your brain to turn it off.</p> <p>When you feel frightened or scared, you are afraid because of something that happened recently or years ago. Your brain is confused and alarmed, and it tells your body that there is danger right now. This is not right. You have to tell your brain that it is safe right now and that there is no reason to be afraid right now. There are several ways of talking to your brain: You can talk to yourself, either silent or loud, saying that the alarm should be turned off because I am safe right now. There is no need for the alarm to be on right now. You can also talk to your brain with the help of exercises such as: safe place / tense and release / breathing techniques. When you do these exercises your body becomes calmer and forces your brain to turn off the alarm.</p> <p>You can actually communicate with your brain and tell the brain to turn off the alarm without actually saying anything. The reason why you can communicate to your brain with your body – is because the body and mind is connected.</p>

**Body and mind are connected**

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A relaxed body does not go with a frightened brain. You cannot be afraid in a relaxed body. It is just impossible. A frightened brain cannot be attached to a calm body – it does not work. When you manage to relax your body, the brain will also automatically become more relaxed and will turn off the alarm. When the alarm is turned off it is easier to think pleasant thoughts, solve problems and not to worry.

*Draw on the blackboard:* the sequence with the girl/boy and the cloud to show how the mind and the body are connected. The drawing should illustrate how fear can be picked up by the brain and develop into a cloud in your head. Later the thoughts in the cloud can embrace your whole body.



*Ask the class:* How does a thought of fear end up as a black cloud and later embrace your whole body? How does it feel to be engulfed in a black cloud? How can we get rid of the black cloud – can you think of an effective cloud-buster; which qualities should such a devise have?

*Avoidance:* Naturally we want to avoid things that have been painful; that is actually very healthy. Sometimes avoiding something is an overreaction, and if we do this often we have developed avoidance behaviour. Then we might start to avoid more and more and this can interfere with our ability to do things we usually like. It can also interfere with the feeling of being in control in your own life. When we avoid too much, we lose energy and we become stressed – and it can restrict our sense of control in our own life. Avoidance behaviour is something you do without thinking about it, and sometimes you are not even aware that you have avoidance behaviour.

	<p><i>Ask the class:</i> Can you give examples of avoidance behaviour? (E.g. not going to certain places or trying not to think of something in particular.)</p> <p><i>Anger, fear, sadness and happiness:</i> where in your body can you feel these different feelings?</p> <p><i>Draw a human being:</i> draw a human in your workbook and colour different feelings. Mark the bad feelings you experience in one colour and pleasant feelings in another colour.</p> <p>(drawing – 2 human beings)</p> <p><i>Explain:</i> The idea of this exercise is to make you to be better to identify and recognise these feelings.</p> <p><i>Ask the class:</i> When do you experience these feelings?</p>
<p><b>Summary and closure</b></p>	<p>5 <i>Summary:</i> Today we learned that the body and mind are connected. By learning different strategies to calm the body, you can also make your mind feel less stressed. Then it is easier to think pleasant thoughts.</p> <p>The body and mind are connected in such a way that they affect each other. When you manage to calm down your body, your brain will automatically become calmer as well. A relaxed body cannot be attached to a frightened brain. You cannot be afraid in a relaxed body. If you recognize a feeling that is an overreaction you can tell yourself that you are safe and that there are no reasons to feel stressed right now. This can help the brain to be relaxed – that is what we do in these sessions.</p> <p><i>Thank the pupils:</i> for participating in the group and acknowledge how they showed respect for each other when sharing their thoughts and experiences. Emphasize the good social interactions that have taken place. Give examples you have noticed.</p> <p><i>Homework:</i> Talk to your brain by calming your body using the breathing exercise, tense and release, safe place, and shake it loose. If you are disturbed by nightmares, you can also use these activities before going to sleep.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <i>Thank you:</i> for participating and sharing your thoughts with the class.</li><li>- <i>Next session:</i> we will meet (give time and place) and we will talk more about the different ways you can talk to your brain in order to make it calm down and turn off the alarm when you don't need the alarm to be on.</li><li>- <i>Sing the theme song.</i></li></ul>
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## The mind and body are connected

As a consequence of the mind-body interaction, major and minor stressful, overwhelming experiences can cause tensions at a mental and physical level. Victims of trauma commonly report symptoms of reliving the incident, avoidance, emotional numbing and increased arousal. In addition, they often suffer from various bodily pains such as headaches, stomach cramps, tensions in the neck and shoulders and so on. Some professionals actually think that every mental knot has a corresponding physical, muscular “knot” and vice versa.

*How can you remove the black cloud?* You can discuss with the pupils what they think could be the qualities of an effective cloud-buster: a cloud-buster that not only takes away the feeling of loneliness but also a feeling of being afraid and stressed. At this point they can make their own lists from previous activities, but they might need some guiding questions.

The goal of this exercise is to be able to recognize and identify the “cloud” in them, recognize the body sensations, and recognize when the cloud appears. The cloud can appear in different types and shapes: small or big, thin or thick, black or white and they might carry rain or snow.

You can draw a big sun on the blackboard; tell them this is the cloud-buster. Ask them what can make worries and stress go away; what is this sun made of? Write the answers in the big sun. Draw some sunshine, and each sunbeam can be an activity; ask them what activity they suggest helps them. One way to bust the cloud is to be engaging in an activity, something that does not give any time to worry. Ask them to then draw their own different clouds, and then a cloud-busting sun with sunbeams. Let them write down their own helpful activities. Ask if they want to share their own list in class.

By doing this exercise together one is increasing a sense of safety and also the sense of self-belief that in itself is an effective cloud-buster.

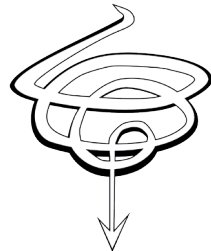
## Session 3: Talking to your brain

**Goals:** Be observant of possible negative thoughts, how they might occur and the negative effect they have. They should learn techniques to help control their negative thoughts. Also sum up and repeat the reasons for, and the effect of, talking to your brain: safe place / tense and release / breathing techniques / self-instruction by talking out loud to yourself: “I’m safe now”.

**Tools:** Blackboard, crayons and personal workbook.

**Time:** About 45 minutes.

<b>Opening the session</b>	<b>Min</b> 5	Start with the tense and release exercise and breathing exercises. Sing the group’s theme song.
<b>Unwanted thoughts &amp; distracting</b>	25	<p><i>The negative spiral of unwanted thoughts:</i> We spend a great deal of time listening to our thoughts. Most of these thoughts are positive and productive, but some of them are negative and unwanted thoughts about ourselves and our future. We accept many of these unwanted thoughts as the truth without even questioning them. It is easy to get caught in a negative spiral of unwanted and negative thoughts, but it is possible to control the thoughts instead of the thoughts controlling you.</p> <p><i>Make a list:</i> What sort of negative thoughts could they be? Example thoughts could be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I will never make it at school</li> <li>- I will never grow old</li> <li>- I can’t change anything, it doesn’t matter what I do</li> </ul> <p>If you experience being in such a negative cycle, what happens in your brain is as follows. The negative thoughts become louder. It becomes harder to think thoughts other than the negative ones. The more we listen to the thoughts, the more unpleasant feelings we experience. This is similar to the black cloud we talked about last session. Lots of clouds can make a negative spiral of unwanted thoughts.</p>



		<p>It is particularly common to have these unwanted thoughts when you are alone, when you are doing nothing and when you are trying to sleep. Some of them might even keep you from falling asleep. These unwanted thoughts can be stopped or changed. Imagine the flow of your unwanted thoughts as a river. Sometimes a river can be big and powerful like the (name a local river), or it can be small, like a stream. But just like the fact that the flow of a river can be controlled and changed by humans, it is also possible to change the flow of your unwanted thoughts. One way of stopping the thoughts is to use distraction methods. Distracting your brain from unwanted thoughts or intrusive memories is a very helpful way of dealing with such thoughts or memories.</p> <p><i>Make a list:</i> What are your strategies to distract your brain from these thoughts?</p> <p>Examples of such distractions can be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- thinking about something else in detail from beginning to end</li> <li>- taking part in favourite activities</li> <li>- listening to or playing music</li> <li>- reading books</li> <li>- going for a run, playing football, doing other sports</li> <li>- playing games</li> <li>- being with friends</li> </ul>
<p><b>Talking to your brain</b></p>	<p>5</p>	<p><i>Explain:</i> When you are afraid or scared of something that happened in the past, maybe you have nightmares about it, your brain is confused and tells your body that there is danger right now. This is not right. You have to tell your brain that you are safe now and that there is no reason to be afraid. You have to help your brain to turn off the alarm.</p> <p><i>Self-instruction:</i> You can talk directly to your brain and to your body by talking out loud or saying it silently without words. You can say: I'm safe right now.</p> <p><i>Ask the group:</i> What else can you tell yourself in order to become calm, relaxed or even happy?</p> <p>Ways of “talking” to your brain are: safe place / tense and release / breathing techniques / self-instruction by talking out loud or silently.</p>

<b>Your favourite techniques</b>	5	<i>Ask the class:</i> which of the techniques they have learned are their favourites and why.
<b>Closure</b>	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Thank you</i> for your participation and for sharing your thoughts in the sessions.</li> <li>- <i>Homework:</i> Practise talking to your brain, breathing exercises and safe place before you go to sleep.</li> <li>- <i>Next session:</i> the next session will be (time and place) and it will be about how to receive help and support when you are stressed and afraid and also how you can give help to others.</li> <li>- <i>Sing the theme song.</i></li> </ul>

## The spiral of negative thoughts

*An explanation for the pupils:* A negative spiral drags us down into the dark clouds. The body makes us feel threatened; it does that by giving us an uneasy feeling in our body. A little stress can easily develop into more stress. It is easy to feel the negative feelings: angry, agitated, frustrated, lonely and a feeling of chaos. When we feel unsafe our negative thoughts increase, as in: “I can’t manage”, “I will never complete school”, “and I am not going to be old” etc. In order to stop the negative spiral we need to be clever and understand the small lies. The body keeps on telling small lies to our brain; the brain is fooled and passes on the lies to our thoughts. The brain and our thoughts believe the lies and give us strong negative feelings.

We can stop this spiral of negative thoughts by breathing calmly, thinking positive thoughts and remembering positive experiences. One way to regulate our negative feelings is by being with others. Avoidance behavior is stopped by engaging in activities with others. Inner chaos is stopped by experiencing structure and order, for instance a good lesson at school gives good feelings. A feeling of being unsafe is stopped by experiencing a safe environment.

*Knowing about the clouds:* how they appear, how they build up and embrace our body and how you can get rid of them – knowing about the negative spiral of unwanted thoughts – all this knowledge makes us more tolerant and competent to deal with our stress, and it makes us more capable to help others.

## Helping others to be aware of clouds and spirals

When the pupils have been more experienced in detecting their own variety of clouds and negative spirals you can focus the teaching on how they can support each other in the search for clouds and spirals and how to chase them away. When feeling “cloudy” you might be exhausted from stress. Knowing that you have effective “suns” and other cloud-busters within reach (among your friends, at school, at home) is a way of strengthening the *community feeling of connectedness*. You help the pupils to recognize the “clouds”, practice the techniques and also to enhance the social climate at school. One way to bust the clouds and get rid of “stormy weather” is to focus on how to include all the classmates. Having fun together is one way of increasing a *sense of safety* and also the *sense of self-belief*.

Isolation will always increase symptoms; connectedness will always calm down and enhance a feeling of being in charge and in control of your life.

*Draw a big sun*; tell the pupils it will cover the whole school. Ask how they can make sunbeam activities for the whole group. How can they help each other to recognize the clouds in others, how can they see and detect “cloud-feelings”?

One way is to respond to facial expression. When agitated or shy, what can be a nice way to be greeted? One way to bust the negative spiral of increasing clouds and unwanted thoughts is talking about how to get everyone included in play. Find examples of how to invite others to play, talk to someone they trust and so on. By having fun together you are increasing a sense of safety and also the sense of self-belief that is an effective cloud-buster.

## Session 4: How to give and receive help and support

**Goals:** Learn through discussion: what sort of help and support you can get when you feel stressed – who can give it – how to receive it and where you can find it.

**Tools:** None needed.

**Time:** About 45 minutes.



<b>Opening the session</b>	<b>Min</b> 5	Start with tense and release and breathing exercises. Sing the theme song.
<b>Awareness of stress in others</b>	10	<i>Ask the class:</i> How can you support others when they feel stressed and are afraid? How can you recognize a stress reaction in others? <i>Make a list on the blackboard.</i>
<b>Social support and connectedness</b>	10	<i>Talk about the following and make lists on the blackboard:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Different types of social support: social connection (invite a friend to play).</li> <li>- How can you give advice to a friend about calming exercises, how to concentrate better at school and how to sleep better?</li> <li>- How can you change experiences of the exercises in order to improve your own exercises and routines?</li> </ul>
		<i>Discuss:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sometimes we all can be easily offended and we easily misunderstand others. We can feel hurt if someone does not want to play with us. How can you refuse to participate in play in a polite way? How can a rejection be understood?</li> <li>- Where can we get support when we feel bad, sad or afraid: friends / parents and relatives / teacher / counsellor? What can you do if you feel unsafe on the way back and from school?</li> <li>- How can you ask for support? Who do you contact: friends / teachers / school counsellors?</li> <li>- How can everyone take part in including others in class?</li> </ul> <i>Sometimes you need extra support and help:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When should you ask for help? Get examples of different reactions and situations (help for concentrating on school work / help when you cannot sleep and when your stress reactions do not calm down).</li> <li>- Give examples of what support they can get in school from the teacher and from the school counsellor.</li> <li>- What else is available in the local community?</li> </ul>
<b>Practise social support</b>	15	How can we give support: listen and reassure the pupils regarding their safety? <i>Role play:</i> Pick a specific setting and practise giving compliments to classmates.

<p><b>Closing the group</b></p>	<p>5</p>	<p><i>Give a summary of the sessions:</i> Take some time to talk about what you have all been doing over these sessions.</p> <p><i>Tell the pupils:</i> They have all done very well in these four sessions. Inspire them to continue to use some of the techniques they have learned and explain that you hope that these techniques will help them to gain more control over inner stress and unwanted thoughts.</p> <p><i>Remind them:</i> you can't change the past and what has happened. What we can do is to get better control over how we think about the past and when we want to think about it. It is also important to remember that you can always talk to one of the teachers if you are having problems. And you can all try to help each other to take care of each other.</p> <p><i>Sing the theme song.</i></p>
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## Repetitions: bringing it all together

When you have practiced the exercises, the pupils have chosen their own set of favorite exercises, and the four theoretical sessions have been implemented you should every now and then ask the whole class about their nightmares, their concentration at school and their concentration when doing homework. Ask one question and alternate between the questions on different days. Also continue to use the calming exercises at the beginning of the regular school lesson or as a break to enhance concentration.

### Concentration at school

<p><b>Concentration at school</b></p>	<p>5</p>	<p>Did anyone have concentration problems yesterday?          Can you tell us about the problems you had?          What did you do to calm yourself down?          - How do you use the different exercises?          - How do you talk to your brain to make it calmer?</p>
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## Concentration when doing homework

<b>Concentration when doing homework</b>	5	Did anyone have concentration problems when doing homework yesterday? Can you tell us about the problems you had? What did you do to calm yourself down? - How do you use the different exercises? - How do you talk to your brain to make it calmer?
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## Nightmares

<b>Nightmares</b>	5	Did anyone have nightmares last night? What did you do when you woke up? What did you do to calm yourself down? - How do you use the different exercises? - How do you talk to your brain to make it calmer?
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## Your favorite combination

<b>Performing the exercises</b>	5	Can you tell us about your favorite combination of calming exercises? Can you tell us when you use them? What is your best experience of the positive effect?
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In addition you should ask individual follow up questions on the students general well-being and if they feel safe. Do they feel safe coming to school and going home, and do they feel safe in class? If not; ask them why and discuss with the individual pupil different ways to improve the situation.

*About the exercises:* The mind-body oriented exercises and techniques aim to reduce psychological and/or physiological arousal and tension, as well as increasing body awareness, attention and concentration. The exercises can be inserted into the daily classroom schedule in order to create short breaks, but they can also be combined to create longer sequences. All of them can be practised while the students are sitting or standing next to a desk. The exercises outlined in this manual are suggestions, and will hopefully encourage teachers to make use of appropriate exercises they already know.

We have given a rather detailed description of the various exercises. When instructing the students, though, teachers should aspire to use their own words and present the exercises in an age appropriate way. Directions that are too rich in words may distract the students from focusing on the exercise.

When it comes to procedures containing movement it is essential to remind the students to coordinate breath with movement. The exercises in this manual are suitable for students aged 10 years and older.

*A final note of caution:* If pupils become very uncomfortable with the exercises, they should stop, calm down and be encouraged to try again later. If they continue to be very uncomfortable they should not continue with these exercises. You should never force or push a pupil to participate, only try to motivate them. The pupil should always stay in control. Participation should be voluntary; it is a delicate learning process where the pupil tries, fails and tries again.

## Extra Reading

### Stimulating “self-healing”

Research has indicated which mechanisms are at work in those who experience “self-healing” after a critical incident. People in this group seem to effectively manage to put terrible experiences behind them and not think of the experiences that often. It turns out that most of these people have not entirely healed themselves, but they got help from others. First of all, they had someone they could talk to, they have talked extensively to at least one person they trust. In addition, they have an understanding and supportive environment and a family climate that offers the opportunity of open communication. Family members and knowledgeable persons in the youths’ social network may facilitate the self-healing process – teachers play a key role in this crucial support because they are part of a stable environment. A traumatized child/adolescent will lack an inner structure and calmness; a teacher can, by understanding and reassuring, “lend” the pupil his/her calmness. By various teaching methods and interaction you can show that you have faith in the child’s process. Inner stress often makes the pupils distracted, but by being “here and now”, being social and engaged in activities, the pupils increase their self-belief.

Teachers play a key role in the crucial support to engage the pupils self-healing

Self-healing is a slow process that starts with recognizing the stress signs and starting to do something about them. As we have listed in previous chapters, a self-healing process is made up of many small steps, and it takes patience and repetition. When understanding the connection between body and mind (thoughts, feelings) one might not be so easily overwhelmed.

Self-healing is about increasing body awareness, being able to gradually take control over unwanted thoughts and using ways of “talking” to the brain in order to turn off the automatic alarm response when it is not needed. Practice will give new experience and the brain makes new structures that enhance the feeling of safety and self-belief. Gradually the pupil becomes calmer.

When you see a pupil having learning difficulties you should invite the pupil to have a conversation about it. Check out whether there might be psychosocial problems such as stress. You should encourage the pupils to select a teacher they trust and start talking with her/him on a regular basis. The teacher should engage in an open discussion about different strategies that can enhance concentration for this particular pupil. Make a plan together; try it out and evaluate it together. Also involve the parents if the learning problems persist.

## Working together with parents

When you start teaching BLP-1 in your class, we recommend informing the parents even though the program is included as a part of the regular teaching at your school. The reason for involving parents is because the parents can help you reach the learning goals in a more effective way. Experience and research clearly tell us that the most effective support a child/adolescent can get in a crisis is the support from their parents and family – and from the teachers. The support becomes particularly effective when parents and teachers work together.

The support becomes especially effective when parents and teachers work together

We recommend having one or two parents groups/meetings where you address and explain the Better Learning Program: the educational goals, the exercises and why you do this in class. Focus on explaining the way you talk in class about the “body and mind is connected” and how to “turn off” the alarm response. The parents should get a general understanding of the following:

- Stressful reactions are normal reactions in a dangerous situation.
- Body and mind are connected: a relaxed body cannot be attached to a frightened brain. This means that if you can make your body relax, your mind will automatically become more relaxed as well. You can control your reactions by using different ways of “talking” to your brain.

- Stress reactions become less scary when you know how to deal with them and talk about them to a trusted person.
- It is necessary to practise the relaxation exercises over time to experience a positive effect.
- It is important to continue discussing progress with the teacher, classmates and family members.

You could use the following text as an invitation to the parents group.

Invitation to parents meeting

### **Increasing Learning Capacity among Pupils in Ongoing Crises**

We would like to invite all the parents in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade to a parents meeting about how our pupils can increase their learning capacity at school. We know that several of the pupils at our school get their learning capacity affected by the lack of proper sleep and concentration problems. Some of this is due to stressful reactions from the ongoing crisis situation.

The next weeks we will teach the pupils different coping strategies and exercises that they can use to calm themselves down and improve their concentration at school. We invite you to an information meeting so you can help and support your child in practicing these exercises – and encourage them to find their own personal combination of exercises and techniques that can be employed to reduce stress at school, before going to bed and when waking up from a nightmare.

Welcome!

## **When extra help is needed**

Pupils have different reactions to crisis. The variety of stressful reactions will vary according to a number of factors such as the level of exposure, their previous crisis experience and the level of support from family and from school. The majority will get the support they need by being socially engaged at home and at school in

order to engage their own self-healing. After a crisis all of the pupils in your class would profit on extra support and advice on how to concentrate and how to manage to calm oneself down when one feels stresses – and most of the time after a crisis situation we feel stressed and activated when it is safe and we do not need to.

About 20–30 % of the pupils might need some extra support and attention at school and at home because they do not manage to calm themselves down, or they keep on having stress reactions weeks and months after the majority of the class have lost theirs. Some pupils in this group may require special help from medical doctors or other mental health specialists.

After a crisis all of the pupils in your class would profit on extra support

Teachers need to be able to recognize the stress reactions that keep on interfering with the pupil's life and hindering her/him in carrying out the daily tasks – such as learning at school. These pupils often show the following reactions;

- Are withdrawn and do not participate in the usual social interaction at school
- Are aggressive and end up in fights
- Show a significant drop in school performance; they don't manage what they used to;
  - Loss of concentration
  - Loss of interest
  - Not doing their homework
  - Being absent from school
- Sleeping problems
- Intrusive memories that show up during daytime or as nightmares

When you as a teacher observe these reactions over time, you should do three things; talk with the pupil and the parents. Then you should discuss with colleagues or the school counselor and consider a referral to a mental health expert.

The Better Learning Program, level 1 (BLP-1) is designed to address common needs in crisis situations that all pupils would profit from in order to stimulate their self-healing. The BLP level 2 is a more specialized group- and individual intervention, targeting pupils with persistent stress symptoms that to a large extent



influence their daily functioning. The BLP-2 is carried out by trained teachers and counselors.

## **The stress of being a teacher in a crisis**

Living in an ongoing crisis situation is at times extremely challenging and hard. As a teacher you work with helping your pupils through the crisis and into the normalcy of regular life. In this process you should also be aware of your own needs. In the same way you are observing your pupils, you should observe yourself; what are your stress reactions and how do you cope with them? What are your current needs and how can you improve your own self-healing? You and your colleagues should also benefit from performing the exercises outlined in this manual to unwind and dissolve stress after work.

You and your colleagues should also benefit from performing the exercises outlined in this manual to unwind and dissolve stress after work

*Symptoms of burnout are:* loss of interest in work, loss of energy, eating disturbances, pain and headaches, sleeping problems and working more and more without taking time to relax. Feeling sadness, grief and anger are other normal and frequent reactions. The consequences over time can be severe; you might lose interest in your work and develop problems in your social relations.

*The general advices are:* talk with friends and colleagues, maintain your social life, keep up a healthy diet, exercise, limit smoking and do not drink alcohol excessively. Preferably you should engage in a structured colleague-support system. This should be arranged at your school, where you regularly sit down with a small group of colleagues and discuss the stress of being a teacher in a crisis situation. Participating in a coping oriented colleague-support system has proven to be highly effective to prevent burnout. In order to be effective, the groups should be structured and planned. We advise you to consider starting coping oriented teacher groups at your school.

## Measuring improvements

An important question to be asked is: does it work? A couple of weeks after you have completed the Better Learning Program, it is time to measure possible changes. In order to register any individual changes we first need to find out the pupils current level of well-being. Before you start teaching the program you let your pupils fill out the questionnaire. Then you teach the program, and about two weeks later you give the pupils the same questionnaire – to measure change. See the questionnaire below.

When you have both questionnaires you can compare and determine if there have been changes – or lack of changes – on an individual- and group level. The individual result could be the basis of an individual conversation where you and your pupil discuss different strategies for calming down and ways for improving learning.

One of the questions is about nightmares. A nightmare is defined as a scary and terrifying dream. The dream is recurrent and when waking up from a nightmare the pupil feels fear or horror.

The result from the questionnaire could be the basis of an individual conversation where you and the pupil discuss strategies to further improve the learning

# Monitoring well-being at school

Before and after BLP-1

Name of pupil: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire is given to all pupils to monitor their current well-being. You read the questions aloud in class and the pupils fill in the answers. Or you can fill in the answers together with pupils individually or in smaller groups.

In a few weeks after the Better Learning Program level 1 is finished the pupils will be given the same questionnaire to measure possible change in their well-being.

## 1. Female or Male

Boy:  Girl:

Now I will ask you different questions on how you feel your situation is right now. You can place your answer on a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 is not satisfied ☹ and 10 is very happy and satisfied 😊

### 2: Most of the time I am satisfied with my life

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
☹									😊



### 3: I like being at school

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
☹									😊



### 4: Most of the time I am able to do my best at school

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
☹									😊



**5: Most of the time I can concentrate easily at school**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
									



**6: Most of the time I am able to do my homework**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
									

**7: I feel safe at school**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
									

**8: I feel safe on the journey to school and the journey home**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
									

**9: Have you ever told your teacher that you have been stressed or scared?**

Yes:  No:

**10: Do you have friends to play with/be with at school?**

Yes:  No:

**11: In the last week: how many nightmares did you have in total?**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	More
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Thank you! for answering these questions.**

## Experiences from the field

In 2012, The Norwegian Refugee Council piloted a small scale BLP-1 in five Gaza schools. The following year the project was scaled up to include 25 schools that were heavily affected by the 2012 November war. The experiences from that intervention have contributed to this second edition of BLP-1, and in this presentation we have outlined some experiences from the implementation phase.

*Training teachers in BLP-1:* We had previously trained teachers and school counsellors in the more complex BLP-2. They were already experienced in the Better Learning Program and became instructors for BLP-1 after a short introduction. They then gave a 30 minutes briefing about the core ideas to all the teachers at their local school, and a two hour introductory training session for volunteering teachers. Three weeks later the teachers took part in a one hour follow-up course.

Participating in these courses is recommended, but not an absolute necessity. Our experience is that explaining the underlying ideas and important factors to the teachers, results in a more positive outcome for the pupils. The introductory course helped encourage and motivate teachers, making them focus on the core concept of the manual. The follow-up course made teachers more confident and helped identify the effective factors and include them into their everyday teaching.

For the majority of the pupils it was a new experience having individual conversations with teachers about their level of fear and discussing strategies to improve their concentration when doing school-work.

*Can the training be skipped?* Yes, it can. An experienced teacher with the right qualifications would be able to put the insights from the manual alone into use. Even though it is possible to hand out the manual without further training, we would recommend a minimum of formal training, inspiration and motivation. If teachers are not inspired they will simply not use the manual.

*Ways of organising the intervention:* Some teachers chose to implement the whole procedure as described in the manual. Some saw the manual as a “tool box” and chose from the variety of exercises and lessons. Some applied it to the whole class and some used it for smaller groups.

*Challenges and obstacles:* The headmaster needs to approve the intervention. Parents should be informed and be invited to a meeting where the strategies for improving learning capacity is explained. The biggest challenge we met was practical obstacles, such as finding the time and prioritising the implementation, finding physical space for performing some of the exercises, and difficulties with carrying out some of the exercises in large groups. Some teachers found it inappropriate to carry out certain exercises with boys and girls together. It is up to the teacher to select the appropriate exercises. And the dedicated teachers all found ways of dealing with and solving possible challenges.

*Rewards:* Those teachers who volunteered were to a great extent positive and even enthusiastic. They found most of the exercises easy to perform. Teachers reported that it all seemed to improve concentration on an individual level; especially for those students who had problems calming down.

It was also reported that the exercises seemed to improve concentration in the class as a whole, due to the breaking up of long sessions into smaller units of teaching. The pupils reported having fun practicing the exercises and they showed an interest in learning about fear and reactions to fear. For the majority of the pupils it was a new experience having individual conversations with teachers about their level of fear and discussing strategies to improve their concentration when doing their schoolwork.

What can go wrong?  
There is nothing in the program that is harmful or dangerous. But the teacher should never force students to talk about their fear – only encourage.

*Is the manual within the scope of the 'regular' teacher role?* Yes, but often it is not within the regular teacher practice. It was commonly reported to be a new experience for teachers to address – in class – the concept of being afraid and explaining common reactions to fear. Pupils were invited to further conversations with the teacher on an individual basis. These conversations were about how both parties – by working together – could reduce the level of fear, in order to enhance concentration and learning. This type of work should be within the teachers' role and practice.

*What can go wrong?* There is nothing in the content of the program that is dangerous or should harm pupils. But it is important that the teachers do not force anyone to tell about their fear. The worst-case scenario is unenthusiastic teachers, un-engaged pupils and the wrong use of valuable time – and possibly angry parents who were not informed about the intervention and think it is a waste of time.

*You are encouraged to implement BLP-1:* And we are interested to learn from your experiences with this program. Please report your field experiences to:

- The Norwegian Refugee Council's Headquarters in Oslo, Norway.  
PO. Box 6758 St. Olavs plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway  
E-mail: [nrc@nrc.no](mailto:nrc@nrc.no)
- Or to Jon-Håkon Schultz: [j.h.schultz@nkvts.unirand.no](mailto:j.h.schultz@nkvts.unirand.no)





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The other breathing exercises are mainly adapted and cited from Saraswati (2006) and Asencia (2011). The “tense and release” exercise is derived from Payne (2005) and the instruction to “safe place” is cited and adapted from Smith, Dyregrov & Yule (2002).

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This classroom manual is written for teachers working under the extreme and hard conditions of an ongoing crisis. The Better Learning Program provides knowledge and easily performed stress calming exercises that can be integrated into regular teaching for children and adolescents. Teachers can help pupils to improve their learning by:

- Establishing a sense of stability and safety
- Calming and self-regulation
- Increase community- and self-belief

Throughout the sessions the pupils should receive training in the different calming exercises in order to choose their own combination of favourite exercises. They should use them at school when feeling stressed or when they have lost concentration, at home before going to bed and when waking up from a nightmare.

Better Learning Program (BLP-1) is based on education, crisis psychology and traumatic stress research.



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