

Here is a sample of activities that can be incorporated as part of a warm up or cool down to reduce stress, relieve tension and build inner resilience.

Alternatively, young players could be taught these techniques and encouraged to do the activities in their own time or when they are feeling stressed or overwhelmed during a sporting activity.

Be aware that not all activities are suitable for young players with a history of trauma.

No one should be pressured to do the exercises if they do not feel comfortable.



Warm ups/ cool downs, relaxation exercises and reset routines for young players and coaches

Exercise 1: Slow leak

Participants pretend they are balloons slowly leaking air.

Ask young players to stand on the spot with their arms forming a big circle over their heads. Eyes can be open or closed as preferred. No one is talking in this exercise and participants should be instructed to focus on their own body and feelings.

Begin the exercise by asking everyone to take a deep breath in. Slowly, as the balloon starts leaking air, the breath is gradually released and the muscles relaxed. Participants gently move down towards the floor like a balloon deflating. Once the balloon is completely empty the participants should be laying on the ground. Ask participants to remain on the floor for a while and focus on the relaxed feelings in their bodies.

Suggested themes for discussion:

- Calm
- Imagination
- Relaxed muscles
- Self-awareness

Exercise 2: Tree in the wind

Participants pretend to be trees firmly rooted in the ground with branches blowing in the wind.

Everyone stands with both arms out, feet placed wide apart, and knees slightly bent. Eyes can be closed or open. No talking during this exercise.

Start the exercise by asking the participants to take several deep breaths in and out and to focus on their own body, sensations and feelings throughout the exercise. The facilitator tells a short story to introduce the activity about a tree with deep roots holding it firmly in the ground and a wind blowing. Participants are instructed to stay still, and when the facilitator says, "the wind is blowing", they wave their arms from side to side and forwards and backwards like the branches of a tree in the wind. Winds can blow with different strength and there can be imaginary sunshine, rain or stormy weather.

Suggested themes for discussion:

- Self-awareness

- Calmness
- Staying grounded, strong or flexible during stressful times

Exercise 3: Take 5

Take 5¹ is a simple breathing exercise which is suitable for children and young people.

It brings the body back into balance, slowing and deepening the breath and slowing down the heart rate, while harnessing the need to move with an action that requires focus and provides sensory feedback to our brains.

Best of all, it is simple and you can use it anywhere, anytime.

- Stretch your hand out like a star.
- Get the pointer finger of your other hand ready to trace your fingers up and down.
- Slide up each finger slowly – slide down the other side.
- Breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Put it together and breathe in as your finger slides up and breath out as your finger slides down.
- Keep going until you have finished tracing your hand.

Exercise 4: Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique focusing on shifting between tensing muscles and relaxing muscles to improve body awareness and control.

Silence and a certain degree of privacy are important for this activity. Participants should lay or stand comfortably and breathe deeply before they start the exercise.

The facilitator guides the exercises with a calm, soothing voice asking young players to first tense their muscles for a few seconds and then release the tension and notice the feeling of relaxed muscles and calm in the body. Participants should tense and release muscle groups in turn under the guidance of the facilitator starting with the foot muscles, then leg, then stomach and back, and then arm and hand muscles.

Suggested themes for discussion:

- Deep concentration
- Body-awareness

¹ Take 5 Breathing Exercise for Kids. Childhood 101. Retrieved from <https://childhood101.com/take-5-breathing-exercise/>

- Inner balance

Exercise 5: Breathe in a colour you like

An easy way for young players to calm themselves if anxious or worried is to do a breathing exercise combined with a mental image. This exercise uses the image of breathing pleasantly coloured air in with the in-breath and unpleasantly coloured air out with the out-breath.

Begin by taking a deep in-breath and let the exhalation be long. Let the bottom of the lungs fill and empty with each in-and out-breath. Next imagine a favourite and pleasant colour being inhaled with the in-breath. Fill the lungs with a beautiful colour you like and find pleasant. Then exhale a least favourite colour with the out-breath. Expel the air imagining the least favourite colour leaving the body. Continue as long as desired.

Exercise 6: Thoughts in a box

Experiencing invading thoughts are common when feeling overwhelmed and stressed. Intrusive thoughts visit the mind as uninvited guests, even if one just wants to be left alone. It is important to learn how to place those unwanted thoughts aside.

In your imagination create a beautiful and sturdy box. You have the freedom to visualize this box in a nice material with as many beautiful colours and decorations as you like. Supply the box with a solid lock. Place every intrusive thought into the box and lock the box securely. Visualizing the box can help release the uninvited thoughts from our head. It is a simple exercise for children and adults alike, as it helps keep the mind clear in chaotic times. Before going to bed, it is also an option to imagine placing the box outside of the bedroom and leaving the thoughts in the box until the next morning.

Exercise 7: Think like an optimist

Optimistic thinking can prevent high levels of distress and can boost inner resilience.

When under pressure, it is easy to react with unhelpful feelings like frustration, annoyance, and irritation. Growing your internal resilience by practicing optimism will prepare you to react to, and handle, everyday stressors effectively. Notice the difference if thinking about a task that you 'have to do' and then change the wording and think about a task in this way: 'I get to do this task' and notice if and how it changes your approach and attitude to the task.

One way to learn optimistic thinking is to identify a set of sentences that will mobilise your resilience and gear you for optimistic thinking.

The next step is to use them generously and often.

Examples could be:

- This is possible and manageable.....
- I get to do it.....
- I know my strengths and inner resources.....
- I can manage.....
- I know how to calm myself.....
- I will ask for help.....

Exercise 8: Patterned, repetitive and rhythmic activities

Patterned, repetitive and rhythmic activities (PRRA) are, as the name suggests, activities that are done multiples times, in a pattern or to a rhythm. Such activities can be calming to the nervous system and body and can easily be built into sporting activities.

Examples include:

- Dribbling or bouncing a ball on the ground;
- Kicking a ball against a wall;
- Hitting a ball or shuttlecock up and down on the racket as many times as possible;
- Open and close your hands as quickly as possible ten times. While opening the hands, try to stretch your fingers as much as you can, and when you close, make the fists tight.

Exercise 9: Reset activities

Reset activities allow young players who are struggling with their emotions to take a break from the assigned task to regulate themselves through helpful movement. Appropriate reset activities will depend upon the sport as well as the cultural context.

Examples include:

- Young players can do something skill building and repetitive, such as kicking a ball against the wall or working on a specific ball-handling skill
- Taking a few minutes to do something else active, like jumping rope, tossing a ball, or some kind of circuit training.

- Having the whole team take a reset with a simple movement activity. For example, the coach can say: "everyone, take a minute to jog over and touch the foul line (or some other designated place), reset and come back with new energy."

Exercise 10: Calming by awakening the senses

In this exercise you need a thin, smooth wooden stick, or a pencil.

The type of touch used in the exercise releases oxytocin, which is a feel-good brain chemical and hormone that helps us stay calm and collected. A release of oxytocin also makes us feel connected to others. It stimulates the skin with its myriads of sensorial nerves.

To begin this exercise, take a pencil or a stick in one hand. Very slowly and thoroughly, touch and physically trace the outline of the other hand. Let the pencil or stick glide over fingers, palm, back of the hand, all the way around and in and out of the hand and around the wrist. Notice if there are areas of the hand and wrist that needs more attention and gently touch and slowly stroke the area.

After a few minutes, put the pencil or stick down. Notice how your hand feels now. How does it feel in comparison to the other hand? Now swap hands and hold the pencil or stick in the other hand.

Touch and trace the outline of the other hand very slowly as before. Give it the same amount of attention and time as you did the first hand. Bring the exercise to an end and notice the effect it has on you.

You may feel a tingling sensation in the hand, note how the shoulders are lowering and breath slowing down. If you like the effect of the exercise, you can use it on your arms, face, throat, neck, lower legs, or feet.

For example, gently move the stick over the skin of half of the face and throat, next compare it with the other part of the face and throat for a moment.

Change sides and repeat the same procedure on the other half of the face.