

Using Distraction Approaches

Using distraction techniques can help to keep aspects of worry, fear and anxiety under control. They can also be useful for other sorts of problems, such as hearing voices. Your named nurse / care coordinator or doctor will be able to discuss with you how best to use distraction for these problems.

It is difficult to concentrate on more than one thing at a time, so when you turn your attention to something neutral or pleasant, you can distract yourself from worrying thoughts or images.

For something to be truly distracting, it needs to be very specific, and to hold our attention and interest. If it is too simple, too vague or boring, it is unlikely to be helpful. There are three main types of distraction techniques:

Physical exercise

this means keeping active even when you are stressed, for example, by walking, jogging, playing a sport, updating your diary, checking through the messages on your mobile phone. You will need to think of different distractions for different activities, as you will not be able to practice some of your ideas in certain situations e.g. you can't play football if you're on a train.

Re-focusing your attention

this means paying a lot of attention to things around you, for example, counting the number of people wearing white clothing in the street, studying the details of a picture or object in the shop, café or pub, reading the details of food packages.

Mental exercise

this means being creative in using our minds to think about a distracting phrase, picture or mental exercise, such as recalling a favourite holiday trip, practising mental arithmetic, describing an imaginary scene, listening to a favourite piece of music in your head. The more detailed you are, the more distracting it will be.

It can be helpful to identify your own list of helpful distraction techniques – take a look at the short exercise on the following page.

John Butler – Consultant Nurse (2008)
PSI Resources: brief description of key interventions

