



Well@Work Podcast Season 2, Episode 22: Mental Focusing During Times of Stress

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Dr Jessica Eslinger discusses how to use a mental focusing technique to cope with times of stress.

My name is Jessica Eslinger and I'm an assistant professor at the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. I'm going to talk with you today about a mental focusing technique that can help you focus and think more clearly during periods of stress. It's also a technique that you can teach to others in your life, such as your children, a partner, friends, or co-workers. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unforeseen challenges which have led to all of us having to adapt quickly. The ever-changing landscape of the pandemic has led to heightened states of arousal, including stress and anxiety. Unfortunately, when we experience high levels of arousal it makes it difficult for us to focus and think clearly, abilities that are so important when we're facing challenges. Research during the pandemic has found elevated rates of stress and anxiety with many parents feeling less effective in their parenting. The technique that I'm going to teach you today is called an SOS and was developed by Dr Julian Ford and his colleagues at the University of Connecticut as a part of a trauma-focused intervention called TARGET. Let's walk through the parts of the SOS and how it can help.

The first part of the SOS is to slow down. Stepping back from a situation helps us be more aware of what's going on in our brain and in our body and it immediately starts to turn down our stress response.

The next step is to orient yourself. By focusing on who we are and what's most important to us in the moment, we activate the parts of our brain that go offline during the stressful situations and prevents us from being able to think clearly and to effectively solve problems.

The last step in the SOS is to conduct a self-check on our level of stress and our feelings of personal control. This step helps us become more aware of our stress and label its intensity without feeling like we must solve every problem. It also helps us become aware of the extent to which we're feeling personal control, that is our ability to think clearly. This step helps us recognize that we may experience stress, but also be able to think clearly about what's happening and how we want to respond.

Let's do an SOS together. Go ahead and get comfortable, you can close your eyes if you'd like to. I'd like you to take a moment to mentally step back and slow down. Let your mind, body, and spirit become quiet and calm. And sweep your mind clear.



Now focus on just one thought that helps you remember who you are, what you believe and value, and what's most important to you right now. Now let's do a self-check. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest and 1 the lowest, rate your level of stress, then your level of personal control, remember that's your ability to think clearly right now. And that's an SOS. It only takes a few minutes to do and can be used almost anywhere. Here are a few tips for using the SOS.

Number 1: if you're doing this with others, such as with your children or a colleague, it can be helpful to report out your numbers. Such as: stress level of 5 and personal control of 7, or whatever your ratings may be. This can be a helpful way to communicate with one another how you're doing. For those who are experiencing a stress level greater than 7 and personal control less than a 3, try taking 3 long deep breaths, and seek out additional supports if your stress does not seem to decrease with slow deep breathing.

Number 2: identifying an orienting thought can sometimes be difficult, especially for children. Prior to using the SOS, you can help your child identify an orienting thought by walking them through what's really important to them, what they value, and what they want to be known for. Having them draw a picture of this can work well, too.

Number 3: getting rid of all of our stress is not the goal of doing an SOS. Rather it's a technique to help us turn down the stress alarm in our brain to help us be better able to focus and think clearly, both of which can help us navigate stressful times. I hope that you found this helpful. Visit our Well@Work website for more episodes and remember to stay well at work, home, and school.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast. Follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work, home, and school.