

My Body Back

Resources for the days, weeks and months after your appointment

The first and most important thing to say is well done for coming to see us. Whatever happened in your appointment, just getting through the door was a huge achievement. We hope that you can recognise the huge steps you have taken in your journey.

It is natural that after attempting your cervical screening (smear test) you may feel a range of emotions. Many of these feelings will ease by themselves over time. You may also find some of the following information helpful. It is a big list of resources so have a look and pick what is relevant or what works for you.

Managing high anxiety, intrusive memories or flashbacks

Experience tells us that for lots of people with histories of sexual violence, an intimate examination can feel traumatic. We do everything we can in the MBB clinic to minimise this, but we understand that you might still find that the process triggers painful memories for you, and that this might happen again when you get home. These are some ideas that may be useful; it may be worth practicing some of them at a time when you are feeling safe and well, rather than waiting until you are feeling distressed to try them for the first time.

We understand that some of the ideas may seem trivial or basic, but we know that they can be effective. Some things won't appeal to you at all and that is ok – focus on the ones you want to try.

➤ **Grounding**

Grounding techniques can be helpful at times when your mind is trying to pull you into the past. They can be particularly helpful if you experience dissociation (or “spacing out”).

- Ask yourself questions to bring yourself into the present. For example:
 - Where am I right now? What can I see? What is this room like?
 - What date and day is it? What is the time?
 - How old am I? (take a moment to calculate this to the exact day, if you can!)
- Use your senses to connect to your physical environment. The 5-4-3-2-1 technique is a simple way of doing this. Take a deep breath and then list 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste. And then repeat.
- If you notice your mind pulling you back into distressing memories, try using some strong sensory stimuli to bring yourself back to the present.
 - Sniff strong smelling essential oils or perfume
 - Carefully hold an ice cube in the palm of your hand for a sharp shock
 - Splash cold water on your face
 - Suck a strong mint or sour sweet
 - Focus on the textures of interesting objects like a spiky ball, fir cone, fidget cube or textured fabric.
- Write down, say aloud or repeat in your head some grounding statements. For example:

*That was then and this is now.
The trauma happened in the past. This is just a memory.
I am safe, I am breathing, I am alive, I can have control of this
situation.
I am loved, cared for and connected.*

➤ **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

This is a technique to help you release any tension you may be holding in your body. Tension is often particularly high at times of anxiety and stress. See our instructions for this below.

➤ **Soothing Rhythm Breathing**

This is a technique to help you to regulate your breathing, calm your body and self-soothe. There are many versions of this available recorded online. See our version below.

➤ **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness refers to paying attention, purposefully and without judgement, to the present moment. Again, this can be helpful if your mind tends to get caught up in worries about the future or upsetting thoughts about the past. HeadSpace is a helpful and popular app; there are, however, a number of other apps, online resources, self-help books and community groups (e.g. the London Buddhist Centre) that teach different forms of mindfulness or meditation. Mindfulness means different things to different people so we recommend finding a resource that you like. Have a look at <http://www.freemindfulness.org/> for more ideas.

➤ **Safe Place**

This exercise helps you to create an image of a safe place. You can imagine your safe place whenever you need to. See our instructions for this below.

Managing low mood

You may feel low in mood, even tearful, after your screening appointment. This is normal, and it is ok to take some time out to rest and recuperate. If you notice that your mood does not improve, some of the following ideas may be useful.

➤ **Give yourself time and treat yourself with kindness.**

Treat yourself how you might treat a good friend who had been through a difficult time.

➤ **Get the basics right.** Try to eat a balanced diet, get enough sleep and exercise regularly.

➤ **Make a plan for the day and stick to it.**

Keeping ourselves busy is a good way of lifting our mood, even when we really don't feel like it. Try to make a plan where each day you do at least one thing that brings you enjoyment or closeness to another person, one thing that gives you a sense of achievement and one thing that is a necessary, even if boring, task.

- **Notice self-critical thoughts** and try to balance them with compassionate, supportive statements.

- **Build a self-care kit**
Find a shoebox or other container and put together a kit of items to use when you need comfort and self-soothing. Some ideas might be:
 - Scented candles or incense
 - Sweets, chocolate or another treat
 - Photographs of your favourite people and places
 - Pampering products such as facemasks and nail polishes
 - A magazine or favourite book
 - A mindful colouring book or puzzle book
 - A comforting piece of clothing, scarf or small blanket

Anxiety about your results

Many people feel worried about getting the results of their screening. Whilst most people get a clear result, it is natural to be worried that something may be wrong. If you do need to have further investigations or treatment following your screening you may find this particularly distressing. Please seek support if you need it.

Jo's Trust offer a specialist helpline (0808 802 8000; <https://www.jostrust.org.uk/get-support/helpline>) for support and information around any aspect of smear testing, HPV and abnormal results.

They also provide general information about cervical screening results here: <https://www.jostrust.org.uk/information/cervical-screening/results>

At Your Cervix offers online peer support related to cervical screening. Find them on Twitter (@AtYourCervix_x) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/AtYourCervixx>).

Relaxation scripts

Progressive muscle relaxation

When the threat system is very active the brain releases signals to the body to get ready to fight perceived danger or to run away: muscles become tense and adrenaline is released throughout the body. The progressive muscle relaxation technique can help you to calm your body down. First, try to practice it at times when you are not feeling particularly stressed, to help you learn what to do.

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing individual muscle groups one at a time before releasing them and letting the tension go. Please only try what is appropriate for you – if you have any injuries to any areas of your body then please skip those sections.

Make sure that you are sitting somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed or distracted. Make yourself comfortable, with your feet flat on the floor, your back straight and your shoulders back. Hold your head upright and face forwards. When you have done this practice and can remember what you need to do without the instructions, you might like to close your eyes.

Begin by bringing your attention to your breath. Gently inhale and exhale, noticing how it feels for the air to enter and leave your body. Allow your breath to settle to a gentle, calm rhythm. It is important throughout this exercise to keep breathing.

Take a deep breath, right down into your stomach. Notice your stomach filling with fresh, new air. Hold your breath for a few seconds and then release, breathing out the tension that you no longer need.

Now bring your attention to your toes. Curl your toes under and hold them tightly. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Next, lift your toes up and feel a stretch in your ankles and calves. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Press your knees together to build tension in your thighs. Keep squeezing tightly. Hold this for five seconds, and then release. Allow the tension to flow down your legs, through your feet and out through your toes.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Squeeze your buttocks tightly. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Make a gentle arch with your lower back, taking care not to hurt yourself. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Pull your stomach in and tighten the muscles. Hold tightly, feeling the tension build. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Next, tighten your chest by taking a deep breath in. Hold this for five seconds. Breathe out deeply through your mouth, as though you are blowing all the tension away.

Now lift your shoulders to your ears. Hold this for five seconds, and then release, feeling the weight of your arms drop down.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Hold your arms out in front of you and lock your elbows. Feel your triceps tighten. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Then, flex your biceps. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Make fists with both hands and squeeze tightly. Hold this for five seconds, and then release. Feel the tension release through your fingertips.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Tip your head gently backwards so that you are looking upwards. Feel tension building in your neck. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Close your eyes and squeeze them tightly shut. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Make a big, broad smile so that your cheeks start to tense. Hold this for five seconds, and then release.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Finally, lift your eyebrows. This should build some tension in your forehead. Hold this for five seconds, and then release. Let all the stress fall from your face.

Pause for about ten seconds, remembering to breathe.

Relax your whole body. Imagine tension flowing away from you. Breathe in deeply and breathe out all which you no longer need.

Soothing rhythm breathing

The way we breathe is very important. We can activate our soothing system through learning to breathe in different ways, which can help to calm our body and mind. This is especially important when we are thinking about something that causes us to feel distress, fear or anxiety. Let's start with soothing rhythm breathing.

Try to practice this exercise every day, for around five minutes, or for less if five minutes feels too long. See if you can gradually increase the length of time you spend on your soothing rhythm breathing.

Make sure that you are sitting somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed or distracted. Make yourself comfortable, with your feet flat on the floor, your back straight and your shoulders back. Hold your head upright and face forwards. When you have done this practice and can remember what you need to do without the instructions, you might like to close your eyes.

When you are settled, begin by paying attention to your breath. How does it feel to breathe in and out? Notice the sensations. Do not try to change your breathing yet, just pay attention to what it is like. It might be difficult to remain focused on your breath to start with – this is normal. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

Now see if you can find a soothing rhythm breathing. This is personal to you – how could you adjust your breath so that it feels calming and soothing? Try breathing more slowly and deeply. Try making each breath slightly longer, and find a comfortable, calming rhythm. See if you can breathe in an even, steady way – in and out, in and out. Keep focusing on how this feels in your body. If you notice that you are distracted or thinking about something else, simply bring your attention back to your breath and focus again on its soothing rhythm. Try to spend at least one minute settling into your soothing rhythm breathing.

You might notice that your body feels like it is slowing down, or that your body feels heavy. Just notice these feelings. Breathe out any tension in your body.

Keep going with this practice for around five minutes. Continue to pay attention to the breath entering and leaving your body, and how this feels. From time to time your mind will wander again and other thoughts will enter your mind. Again, this is normal. Just notice that this is happening, and then refocus on your breathing.

There is no right or wrong way to do this exercise. When you have finished, gently let go of the practice and allow your breathing to return to its natural rhythm. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Stretch out your arms and legs. Allow your attention to go wherever it wishes to.

Imagining your safe place

You might find it useful to write down some notes about your image, or to draw it, or to record yourself describing it.

Begin this exercise with the soothing rhythm breathing practice. Completely focus on the sensation of breath entering and leaving your body. Deepen and lengthen each breath.

When you feel ready, try to build an image of a place where you feel safe and calm. This exercise isn't about trying to change how you are feeling now, but about imagining somewhere where you could feel safe. You can close your eyes if you would like to, or you could focus your eyes on an object or on a picture of your safe place, if you already know what it is.

Your safe place can be anywhere. It is your private image – there is no right or wrong. Perhaps it is a room in your home, or somewhere you have been on holiday. Maybe it is a beach, a forest or a lake. It might be somewhere that you have never been, but would like to go, or it may not even be a real place. You might end up with more than one safe place.

When you are starting to be able to imagine your safe place, begin asking yourself some questions, focusing on each of your senses.

Start with what you can see.

- *Are you inside or outside? What is around you?*
- *What can you see when you look up? Are you looking at the sky, or the ceiling, or something else?*
- *What can you see when you look down? Maybe grass, carpet, sand or a pathway?*
- *Can you see any other people or animals?*

Then what you can touch.

- *What can you feel beneath your feet?*
- *If you are sitting or lying down, what are you sitting or lying on? How does it feel?*
- *What sort of clothes do you need to wear in your safe place, and how do they feel?*
- *What can you reach out and touch? Are you holding anything?*

Next, what you can hear.

- *What sounds are around you? Can you hear animals, music, the sea, traffic...?*
- *Are there other people around you? Are they talking, or making any other sound, or are they quiet?*
- *Is your safe place noisy or silent, or somewhere in between?*

Finally, what you can smell and taste.

- *Are there any specific smells in your safe place? Perhaps a burning fire, or the sea, or some food cooking?*
- *Can you taste anything? Maybe you are eating something comforting?*

Throughout this exercise you might notice that your attention starts to drift away. This is normal, and it's just what our minds do. When this happens, simply notice, and bring your focus back to thinking about your image.

*Remember that this is **your** safe place. Imagine that it welcomes you and wants you to be there. Your safe place wants you to feel comforted and secure. The first few times you imagine your safe place, you may find that you don't actually feel safe. This is natural. We encourage you to keep practicing this exercise, and to imagine how you could feel safe, in time, with practice.*

Support with your mental health and emotional wellbeing

If you are already seeing a therapist, counsellor or other mental health professional, you may like to talk to them about how you have been feeling since your appointment.

If you would like to access support with your mental health and are not under the care of a talking therapies service or mental health team, your GP will be able to advise you about services in your area and make a referral.

Every borough has services providing evidence-based therapies for people experiencing anxiety and low mood. They are free and access to an assessment is relatively quick – even if they are not the right service for you, they will be able to provide signposting or onward referrals as appropriate. Your GP can make a referral for you, but many services also accept self-referrals, usually online. You can look up your local service via <https://www.nhs.uk/Service-Search/Psychological%20therapies%20%28IAPT%29/LocationSearch/10008>

If you are feeling extremely distressed please do let your GP know. If you feel that there is a risk that you may harm yourself, please call 999 or visit your nearest A&E department.

For information about finding a private therapist, see the following links:

- [Counselling Directory](#)
- [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy \(BACP\)](#) – for all kinds of counsellors and therapists
- the [British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies \(BABCP\)](#) – for Cognitive Behavioural Therapists
- [UK Council for Psychotherapy \(UKCP\)](#)
- [Pink therapy](#) – for therapists with LGBTQ+ experience.

Other sources of emotional and practical support

The Samaritans (Tel: 116 123) are available 24/7 and provide a confidential listening service.

Support related to sexual violence and abuse:

Rape Crisis England & Wales - Provides information and support to survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse across England and Wales.

Freephone 0808 802 9999 (12 to 2.30pm, then 7 to 9.30pm, every day) www.rapecrisis.org.uk

Rape Crisis Scotland - Provides information and support to survivors of sexual violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse across Scotland.

Freephone 0808 801 0302 (6pm to 12am, every day) www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk

Nexus NI - Offers free counselling for people who have experienced sexual violence, sexual assault and sexual abuse across Northern Ireland. <http://nexusni.org/>

Galop - Galop gives advice and support to people who have experienced biphobia, homophobia, transphobia, sexual violence or domestic abuse. They also support lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer people who have had problems with the police or have questions about the criminal justice system.

<http://www.galop.org.uk> Helpline: 020 7704 2040

National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC) - Offers support to adult survivors of childhood abuse.

Support line 0808 801 0331 (10am to 9pm, Monday to Thursday, and 10am to 6pm on Friday)

<https://napac.org.uk/>

Southall Black Sisters - Campaigning, information and advice for women affected by gender-based violence.

<http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/> Helpline: 0208 571 0800

FORWARD - Advice, support and specialist health care for girls and women affected by FGM. FORWARD is staffed by sensitive and approachable African women who as well as English speak Arabic and several other African languages.

<http://www.forwarduk.org.uk/resources/support> Helpline: +44 (0)20 8960 4000

Reading list

This is a list of some books that we have loved and found helpful. It is not an exhaustive list and we can't promise that these books will be safe for everyone - although we have tried to be selective. So, as you go through the list, remember to take care, take your time and go easy - these books aren't going anywhere :)

Trauma and our bodies

The Body Keeps the Score (2015) Bessel Van Der Kolk

This book explores the role of trauma in psychiatric illness and how our understanding has changed over the past 20 years, what we have learned about the ways the brain is shaped by traumatic experiences, how traumatic stress is a response of the entire organism, and how that knowledge needs to be integrated into healing practices.

Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-Violence Movement (2016) Edited by Jennifer Patterson

Often pushed to the margins, queer, transgender and gender non-conforming survivors have been organizing in anti-violence work since the birth of the movement. *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-Violence Movement* locates them at the center of the anti-violence movement and creates a space for their voices to be heard. Moving beyond dominant narratives and the traditional "violence against women" framework, the book is multi-gendered, multi-racial and multi-layered.

The Mindbody Prescription (1999) John E Sarno

This book seeks to unpick the relationship between chronic pain and repressed emotions. It claims that many painful conditions-including neck and back pain, migraine, repetitive stress injuries, whiplash, and tendonitis-are often rooted in repressed emotions, and shows how they can be successfully treated without drugs, physical measures, or surgery.

The Courage to Be Me: A story of courage, self-compassion and hope after sexual abuse (2014) Nina Burrowes

We LOVE this book. The courage to be me combines science, storytelling and illustration to send a message of hope to the millions of people who are living with the impact of rape or sexual abuse. It's honest, relatable, helpful and most importantly incredibly caring. It is also available for free if you read it online!

Sexuality, self-love and relationships

Sex for One: The Joy of Self-Loving (1987) Betty Dodson

Betty Dodson dedicated much of her life to taking the shame out of masturbation, showing it to be a healthy form of sexual expression. With warmth and intelligence, and informative line drawings, Dodson explains how anyone can learn to fully enjoy the pleasures of self-love, pointing out that masturbation is still the safest sex.

Come as You Are (2015) Emily Nagoski

An exploration of why and how (CIS) women's sexuality works—based on scientific research and neuroscience—it claims it will radically transform your sex life into one filled with confidence and joy.

The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love (2018) Sonya Taylor

The Body Is Not an Apology offers radical self-love as the balm to heal the wounds inflicted by violent oppressive systems. World-renowned activist and poet Sonya Renee Taylor invites us to reconnect with the radical origins of our minds and bodies and celebrate our collective, enduring strength. As we awaken to our own indoctrinated body shame, we feel inspired to awaken others and to interrupt the systems that perpetuate body shame and oppression against all bodies. When we act from this truth on a global scale, we usher in the transformative opportunity of radical self-love, which is the opportunity for a more just, equitable, and compassionate world - for us all.

Becoming Cliterate: Why Orgasm Equality Matters—And How to Get It (2017) Laurie Mintz

By dispelling the lies, misunderstandings, and myths that have been holding us back, *Becoming Cliterate* tackles both personal and political problems and replaces them with updated outlooks and practical skills needed to change our collective perspective on sex. It's time to finally inform women and men on how to have satisfying experiences in bed that benefit both parties.

The Return of Desire: A Guide to Rediscovering Your Sexual Passion (2008) Gina Ogden

Drawing on three decades of experience as a sex therapist and sex researcher, this book shows us how to: Open up to the four energies that spark desire; transcend guilt, shame, and "good-girls-don't" messages; help heal the sexual wounds of abuse, addiction, affairs, and low self-esteem; and ultimately to enjoy sexual pleasure throughout our life span—from new love, to parenthood, and into our golden years.

Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence (2017) Esther Perel

Drawing on more than twenty years of experience as a couples therapist, Perel examines the complexities of sustaining desire. Through case studies and lively discussion, Perel demonstrates how more exciting, playful, and even poetic sex is possible in long-term relationships.

The Ethical Slut [Third Edition]: A Practical Guide to Polyamory, Open Relationships, and Other Freedoms in Sex and Love (2017) Janet W. Hardy and Dossie Easton

For twenty years, *The Ethical Slut*—widely known as the “Poly Bible”—has dispelled myths and showed curious readers how to maintain a successful polyamorous lifestyle through open communication, emotional honesty, and safer sex practices. The third edition of this timeless guide to the ethics of relationships, communication, and sex has been revised to include new perspectives.

With the Kisses of His Mouth (2011) Monique Roffey

A memoir of sexual self-discovery in the wake of the break-up of a largely sexless relationship. Emotionally reeling, Monique Roffey went searching not just for lovers but to experience the furthest limits of her sexuality.

Action: A Book About Sex (2016) Amy Rose Spiegel

With whip-smart prose, reminiscent of Roxane Gay and Meghan Daum, *Action* interweaves Spiegel's own sexual autobiography with loving advice on one-night stands, relationships, and everything in between.

General popular psychology, healing and spirituality

Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN (2019) Tara Brach

Tara Brach is an American psychologist, teacher and proponent of Buddhist meditation. In this book, she shares a four-step meditation that loosens the grip of difficult emotions and limiting beliefs. Each step in the meditation practice (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture) is brought to life by memorable stories shared by Tara and her students as they deal with feelings of overwhelm, loss, and self-aversion, with painful relationships, and past trauma. She also has a podcast (simply called Tara Brach) where she offers weekly reflections and meditations.

Brené Brown- collected works

We love Brené's relatable humour, honesty and straightforward writing. On her website, she has an [explanation of her books and what you might want to read first](#) - they are all great, so start with the one that feels right.

The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment (1997) Eckhart Tolle

The book is intended to be a guide for day-to-day living and stresses the importance of living in the present moment and transcending thoughts of the past or future. The book also describes methods of relaxation and meditation to aid us in anchoring ourselves in the present.