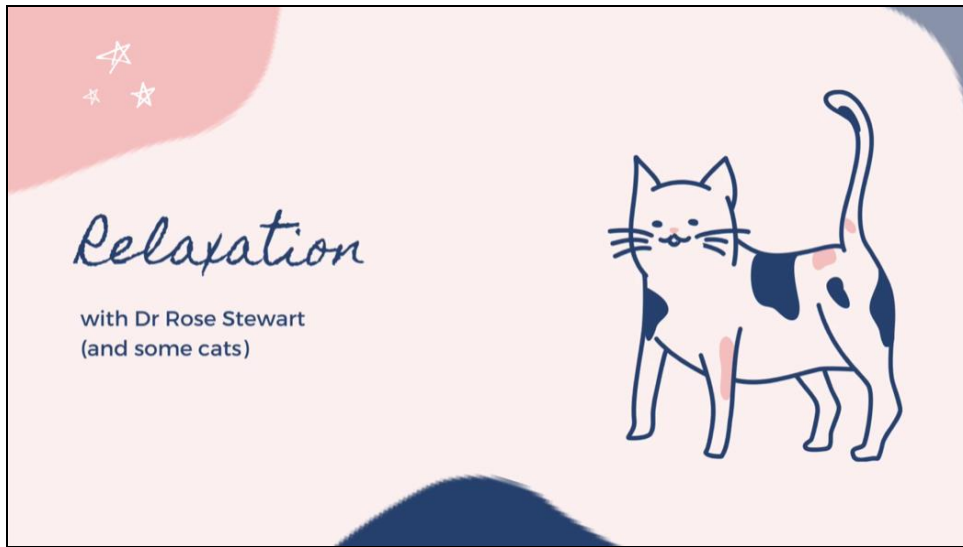



Slide 1



Slide 2



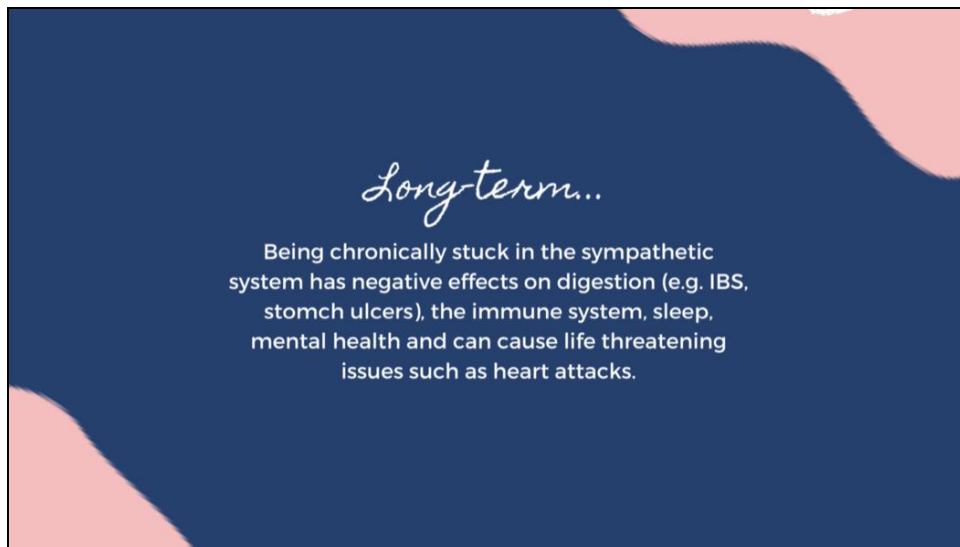
I solemnly swear that this won't be a technical talk, but as well as relaxation techniques we're going to be covering what happens behind the scenes when we're stressed, how relaxation strategies work to counteract stress and some bonus bits on accessing our oxytocin supply



*Sympathetic nervous system - fight or flight*

- Adrenaline & cortisol
- increased heart rate & breathing
- Blood pressure increases
- Blood glucose increases
- 'Butterflies' in stomach
- Sweating
- Wobbly legs
- Clenched teeth
- Need the toilet
- Changes in thinking style - focused, aggressive, urge to escape

Deep in our neurobiology lives a system (the SNS) that gets triggered every time there's a threat around. Back in our cave dwelling days this was used to keep us safe from threats like sabre tooth tigers, but nowadays it is mainly triggered by social media, wasps and pandemics.




The SNS does a fabulous job at keeping us safe from real threats (like when you cross the road), but it's also a trigger happy idiot that gets triggered by non-existent threats like memories, hypothetical situations and general pressure. Not so helpful in modern circumstances.

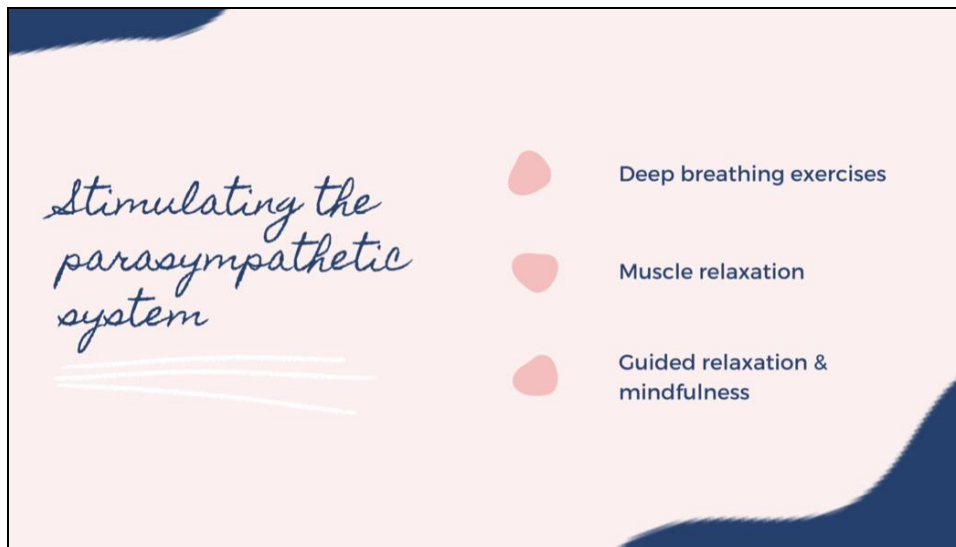
It's important to note that people have different stress tolerances some people get more easily overwhelmed than others, but chronic stress has poor health outcomes for everyone.

*Parasympathetic system*  
*- rest & digest*

- Endorphins
- Slowing down breathing & heart rate
- Digestion recommences
- Muscles relax
- Decreased blood glucose
- Increased range of attention, creativity
- Essential for sexual functioning
- Improves sleep quality



Luckily, we have a 2nd system that 'switches off' the SNS and resets things once a threat has gone. However if the threat is more abstract than a tiger, it's hard for your brain to tell when it's gone away, so sometimes we need to actively switch on this system using relaxation



There's lots of ways to practice relaxation - I'm going to signpost resources for these three areas.

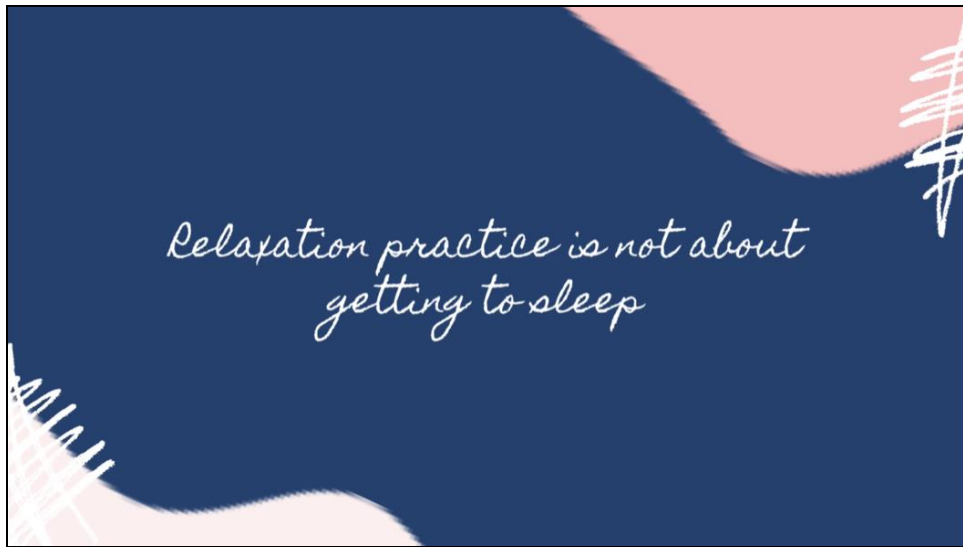
Deep breathing is widely used because something you can actively & easily modify to trigger relaxation. You can do this by counting, visualising shapes, focussing on diaphragmatic 'belly' breathing or following animations like these ones

<https://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/www.buzzfeed.com/amphtml/nathanwpyle/mesmerizing-animations-to-help-you-take-a-deep-breath>

Muscle relaxation is more involved and gets rid of tension - it's particularly good if you're someone who finds it hard to sit still. Progressive muscle relaxation is a great technique to try, as is yoga which relaxes muscles while strengthening <https://youtu.be/v7AYKMP6rOE>

Guided relaxation and mindfulness exercises calm your body down by relaxing you brain and developing you ability to 'unhook' from scary thoughts and memories. Apps like Calm and Headspace are a great place to access resources, and Headspace is currently free for NHS staff.

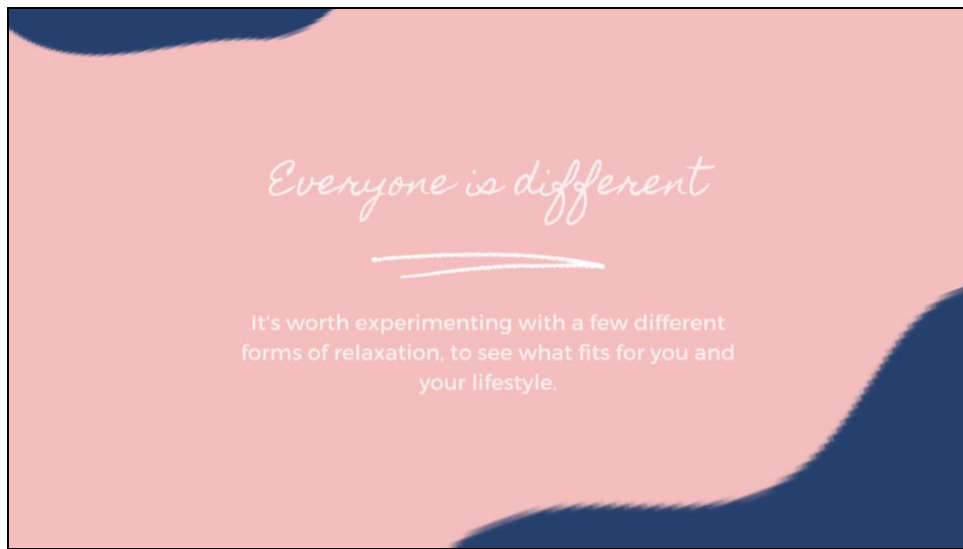
Slide 7



#### Important lesson 1

Lots of people fall asleep during relaxation, which is fine, but not the overall goal because you don't get to experience the full effects. If you fall asleep while relaxing try experimenting with your practice at different times of day.


Slide 8



Important lesson 2

Relaxation is an individual experience that is highly subjective. You need to see what works for you, but don't be afraid to revisit techniques that felt challenging in the past, as your preferences and needs can change over time.

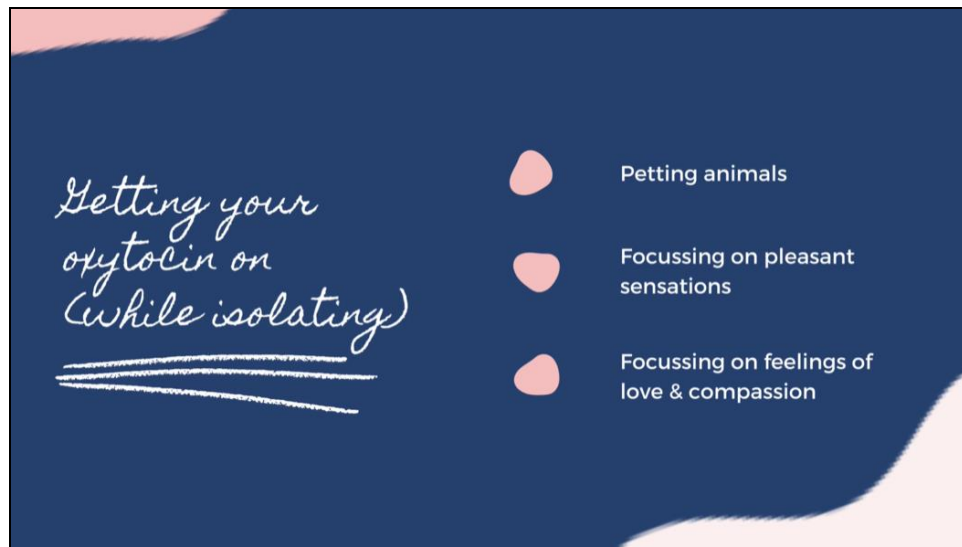




*Oxytocin - the love drug*


- Amazing anti-stress & pain killing properties
- Hugely important for mother-infant bonding
- Stimulated through:
  - Shared social interaction (e.g. eye contact, laughing together)
  - Social physical contact (e.g. hugs, dancing, sex)
  - Soothing touch

Sneaky bonus - As well as the parasympathetic system, there are additional hormones that can help us to naturally relax and feel good. One of the strongest is oxytocin, which is primarily triggered by being around people we love.



Triggering a hormone that relies on social interaction might not be easy during lockdown, but it's not impossible! Staying socially connected is essential, so keep in touch with those you love. You can try a loving kindness meditation here <https://youtu.be/sz7cpV7ERsM>

There is full on scientific evidence that petting animals releases oxytocin- so go love all the dogs and cats you can safely get your paws on!



We've all got a very effective stress system (SNS), that's great at keeping us safe, but not so great at switching off.

We can deliberately activate our calming down system, through relaxation activities

We can enhance relaxation by activating our Oxytocin supplies

Very non-technical learning points

