

# EMPOWER



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# Snakes and Ladders

## ACTIVITY SHEET



No one has ever died from a poisonous snake bite. You don't die from the 'bite', rather it's the venom that enters your body that's highly toxic and destructive. In the same way, if you've encountered a critical incident or high impact life event, toxic stress hormones are injected into your body.



### SESSION OBJECTIVES

**This session is designed to help you understand:**

- (a)** the residual impact critical incidents can have on your biology
- (b)** how to apply physiological First Aid for improved sleep function
- (c)** specific techniques for dealing with toxic stress hormones

# Snake Bite

Critical incidents and high impact life events can be very painful. However, your level of pain is not what determines whether the incident will be damaging to your mental health. Rather, it's the residual biological impact of tragic circumstances that can be harmful. Left unregulated, stress hormones can lead to weight gain, aging, degenerative disease, and psychiatric illness. So, rather than focusing on the incident which may have been painful, your number one priority is to deal with any physiological toxicity the event has triggered.

If you have been bitten by a poisonous snake, focusing on killing the snake won't help you. It's the venom on the inside that needs your urgent attention.

**WHEN DEALING WITH A REAL SNAKE BITE, THERE ARE THREE MAIN PHASES OF INTERVENTION THAT DIRECTLY PARALLELS PHYSIOLOGICAL FIRST AID.**

**01**

**LOWERING YOUR HEART RATE AND REMAINING CALM**

**02**

**GETTING RID OF THE POISON IN YOUR BODY**

**03**

**AVOID GETTING RE-BITTEN BY THE SNAKE**

# Physiological First Aid

Physiological first aid may need to be administered when your normal sleeping patterns are disrupted. If your stress is turning into distress, you might notice you're having difficulty falling asleep because of a racing mind and pounding heart. Alternatively, you may find yourself waking in the middle of the night or unusually early in the morning, and then experience difficulty getting back to sleep again. Needless to say, if you're not sleeping well, there'll be knock on effects during the day. Over time, a lack of sleep can be destructive for your physical health, mental functioning, emotional wellbeing and even relationship dynamics.

## Step 1: Lower Heart Rate

Just like intervention for a poisonous snake bite, the number one goal of your Physiological First Aid plan is to lower your heart rate, so as to reduce the circulation of toxic stress hormones. Doing so will achieve a level of calm that's conducive to sleep. As basic as it might sound, the simplest way to slow the speed of your heart is through controlled breathing.

When you exhale for a longer period than when you inhale, your Vagus nerve (the longest and most complex nerve in your body), releases a neurochemical that instructs your heart to slow down.

1. Position your body in a way where you feel comfortable and relaxed. Perhaps even lay down, facing up.	4. Noticing how your lungs expand into your lower chest cavity, causing your stomach area to rise.
2. Place your hand on your diaphragm (located right beneath your heart, lungs and ribcage).	5. Exhale out (50% longer in duration than when you inhaled), for at least 6 seconds.
3. Breath in through your nose for at least 4 seconds. As you do, your diaphragm will contract.	6. Repeat this exercise 10 times (placing emphasis on 'control', rather than 'deep' breathing).



**After completing the above exercise, wait 2 minutes before answering this next question:**

**Q:** How does it feel to slow your heart rate and achieve a new level of calm?

## Step 2: Antivenom

During the first few hours of slow wave sleep, toxic stress hormones are automatically regulated by your body. For this reason, it's commonly said the hours of sleep before midnight are more beneficial than the hours of sleep after midnight. While controlled breathing may help facilitate good quality sleep, there is another way to directly neutralise toxic stress hormones. This is through the release of endorphins. Endorphins are antivenom.

### Elongated Stretching

1. While lying down on your back, stretch your hands out above your head and feet in opposite directions.
2. Hold this position for 10-seconds, trying to make your body as long as it can possibly be.
3. After 10 seconds, relax every part of your body, and allow your muscles to go completely limp.


### Progressive Muscle Relaxation

1. Starting with your head, clench or squeeze your face muscles as tight as you can for 10 seconds.
2. After 10 seconds, relax every part of your face, and allow your muscles to go completely limp.
6. Progress to your next body part and repeat the exercise (working your way down from head to toe).



After completing the above exercise, wait 2 minutes before answering this next question:

**Q:** How does it feel to release endorphins and restore a sense of well-being?



**IN THE SAME WAY STAYING  
OUT OF THE LONG GRASS  
HELPS KEEP YOU FROM BEING  
INADVERTENTLY BITTEN BY A  
SNAKE, IN A MENTAL HEALTH  
CONTEXT, STAYING AWAY  
FROM THE KINDS OF THINGS  
THAT WILL LIKELY TRIGGER  
INTRUSIVE, UNWANTED AND  
UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS, WILL**

**facilitate  
better sleep.**

# Step 3: Relapse Prevention

Just as the survivor of a snakebite needs to ensure they don't get bitten again, now that you have effectively calmed your heartrate through controlled breathing, and released endorphins through elongated stretching and progressive muscle relaxation, take care not to rev yourself up again. The greatest enemy of your mind when preparing for sleep are the slithering memories and worries that want to bite you again and again.



From the list below, what are the things that you would do well to avoid before bed.

Social Media		Watching the news		TV dramas	
Reflecting on tragedy		Online videos		Intense discussions	
Political commentaries		Contemplating future		OTHER	



From the list below, what are some things you would do well to engage before bed.

Pray with a loved one		Read an uplifting book		Elongated stretching	
Listen to relaxing music		Controlled breathing		Keep a gratitude journal	
Prog. muscle relaxation		Read or listen to scripture		OTHER	