

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Relaxation

Relaxation is allowing physical and/or mental tension to be released. Tension is the body's natural response to threat, part of the body's alarm or survival mechanism. It can be a very useful response, but most of the time we don't need this tension, so it's okay to learn to let it go using relaxation techniques.

Healthy living is a matter of balance. Relaxation is part of the balancing process alongside other aspects of your lifestyle such as what you eat, your physical activity and how you handle stress. Learning to relax takes practice, as with learning any new skill.

Relaxation helps us unwind and bring our tensions and anxiety under control. If you practise regularly you can be prepared for the more stressful times.

How relaxation helps

- *Reduces tiredness* – if you can manage everyday life without excessive tension
- *Improves performance* – your performance in work, sport or music can be raised through self awareness and control of tension
- *Reduces pain* – pain can occur as a result of tension e.g. headaches and backache. Relaxation can help you to cope by raising your pain threshold and reducing the amount of pain
- *Coping with stress* – relaxation helps you to reduce the effects of stress and to breathe effectively
- *Improves sleep* – by allowing you to be calm and peaceful
- *Improves self-confidence* – by increasing your self-awareness and ability to cope with daily life

Breathing and Relaxation

Our out-breath releases tension in the chest muscles, allowing muscles to release their tension more easily. Breathing is far more effective when we use our diaphragms, rather than with the chest muscles. To see where you breathe from and practice breathing correctly, try the following steps:

1. Sit comfortably in a chair and place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen (hand on navel).
2. Take two or three fairly large breaths. Which hand moves first and which moves most?
3. Practise so that it is the lower hand on your abdomen that moves rather than the one on your chest. People often think that their tummy goes in when they breathe in - but the reverse should be the case.

When you're feeling tense or hoping to relax, try breathing out a bit more slowly and more deeply, noticing a short pause before the in-breath takes over (don't exaggerate the in breathe, just let it happen). You might find it useful to count slowly to help elongate the out breathe a little (to yourself or out loud).

Simple Breathing Exercise

Here is a simple breathing exercise which can be done in a few seconds, no matter where you are. It is particularly helpful at stressful times, but it's also useful to do it at regular intervals throughout the day.

Take a deep, slow breath in and hold it for 5 seconds. Feel your abdomen expand as you do this.

Breathe out slowly, to a count of 5. Breathe in again, make every breath slow and steady and exactly the same as the one before it and the one after it. As you breathe out, concentrate on expelling ALL the air in your lungs.

Keep the out breath going for as long as you can. Keep it relaxed for a few seconds before you inhale again.

Quickie Relaxation

Wherever you are (e.g. in the car, supermarket, awaiting appointment etc.)

- STOP
- Shoulders down
- Take 2 or 3 slightly slower, slightly deeper out-breaths (just let the in-breath happen)
- Carry on with whatever you were doing, but just a little slower

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

What is Progressive Muscle Relaxation?

A method of relaxation that teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two step process. It can help reduce overall tension and stress levels and help you relax when you are feeling anxious. It can also help reduce physical problems such as stomach aches and headaches as well as improve your sleep.

People with anxiety difficulties are often so tense throughout the day that they don't even recognise what being relaxed feels like. Through practice you can learn to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. You can then begin to "cue" this relaxed state at the first sign of muscle tension that accompanies your feelings of anxiety.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Before you begin make sure you are wearing loose, comfortable clothing and remove your shoes. Find a comfortable place to sit, then close your eyes and let your body 'go loose'.

Take five slow, deep breaths before you begin.

Step One: Tension

The first step is applying muscle tension to a specific part of your body, your right hand for example. Take a slow deep breath and squeeze the muscles of your right hand (make a clenched fist) as hard as you can for about 5 seconds. Try to only tense the muscles in your hand, but **BE CAREFUL** not to hurt yourself – If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones or any other medical conditions that would hinder physical activity **CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR FIRST!**

Step Two: Relaxing the Tense Muscles

This step involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles. After about 5 seconds of tensing your right hand muscles, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do the next step. You should feel the muscles in your hand become loose and limp as the tension flows out. **It is important to deliberately focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation – this is the most important part of the whole exercise.**

Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, then move on to the next muscle group. Repeat step one, then step two with each muscle group i.e. the arms, the shoulders, the neck, the mouth, the eyes, the forehead, the chest, the stomach, the buttocks, the legs and the feet. **It can take time to relax learn to relax the body and notice the difference between tension and relaxation – don't worry just keep practising!**