

Relaxation techniques for stress relief

Reasons to practice relaxation

Our bodies' natural relaxation response is a powerful antidote to the stresses of our lives. Relaxation techniques are varied and you need to find the one that works best for you.

The relaxation response is not about lying down on a couch, sleeping or being lazy. It is a mentally active approach that leaves the body feeling relaxed. It can be done in a wakeful state or it can be done to facilitate sleep. It takes practice to learn and the benefits increase with practice.

We can't avoid all stress, but we can reduce its effect by practising relaxation techniques. The stress response fills our bodies with adrenaline and cortisol, our "fight and flight" chemicals. These are useful to get us out of true emergency situations where we need to be alert and responsive, but it wears you down if these chemicals are being drip-fed all the time.

In addition to calming us physically, research shows that relaxation also increases our energy, motivation and ability to focus. It combats illness, relieves aches and pains, and allows us to think more clearly, aiding our ability to problem solve.

Techniques to try

Breathing exercises

Breathing is the foundation for human life. It gives us vital oxygen that is required for many essential body processes. It also helps remove carbon dioxide from our body.

Our breathing pattern can be affected by many factors, such as lung disease, stress and anxiety. Conversely, we can learn to use our breathing as a powerful and effective tool to help us manage shortness of breath, reduce muscle tension and stress, and relieve anxiety and pain.

There are several breathing techniques we can learn. As with all new skills, it is important to practice, and then it will become more natural to us.

Mindfulness of breathing

This is a method of relaxation. It uses our breath as an anchor for our attention. We always have our breath with us and we can practice this technique anywhere.

Consider the qualities of a 'mindful' person – thoughtful, observant and considerate. Mindfulness is the ability to maintain a non-judgemental attention to the present moment. Practising mindfulness of breathing can help with physical and mental relaxation.

Focus your attention on your breathing but don't alter the pattern of your breathing

Pay attention to the movement of air through the mouth and nose

If your attention wanders to thoughts in your head – notice them, and then return to the cycle of breathing

If your attention is distracted by external sounds – notice them and return to the cycle of breathing

Pursed lip breathing

Pursed lip breathing is one of the simplest ways to manage breathlessness and anxiety. It helps to release trapped air from the lungs and decreases the work of breathing. If practiced regularly, it can become a good way of taking control of our thoughts and our breathing. It can provide a small dose of relaxation whenever we need it.

Breathing out through pursed or puckered lips is like gently blowing out to flicker the flame of a candle or to whistle quietly. This allows us to take normal sized breaths in a more controlled way.

Sit comfortably in your chair, allowing your hands to rest gently on your thighs

Relax your neck and shoulder muscles by pulling your shoulders down and then releasing them

Now, keeping your mouth closed, breathe in gently through your nose for a count of two.

Breathe out slowly and gently through pursed lips for a count of four....

Continue breathing rhythmically like this, making the out breath last a little longer than the in breath. In, one...two... Out, one...two...three...four...

Be aware of allowing a space between the out breath and the in breath

Continue like this for a few more breaths and then breathe normally

Pursed lip breathing can help in stressful situations or when we feel tired or tense. It allows us to focus on our breath and regain control. Once we feel comfortable using the new technique we can try it out in real situations, such as sitting in a traffic jam, waiting in a queue at the shops or when trying to get to sleep.

Diaphragmatic breathing

The diaphragm is a large dome-shaped muscle, which separates our chest and abdominal cavities. It plays an important role in our breathing. In some people, the diaphragm does not work efficiently. This may be due to various reasons such as lung disease, pain or anxiety. We can learn a technique to help us use our diaphragm more effectively.

Sit comfortably with your legs uncrossed and your shoulders relaxed.

Place your hand on your abdomen, with your little finger near your belly button - your hand will be resting over your diaphragm

Place your other hand on your upper chest

Allow your breath to come in and out naturally - notice how you are breathing...

With your “in” breath, be aware of your diaphragm rising under your hand and your abdomen expanding gently - the hand on your chest should hardly move at all

In your own time, sigh out through your mouth

As you breathe in again picture your lungs being filled with fresh air

Allow your diaphragm to help you, by pulling the air in and pushing it out - feel the movement...

You may wish to combine this technique with the pursed-lip breathing on the out breath.

You may feel slightly heavier as you do this exercise and that you are more relaxed. Imagine your breath reaching lower and lower down in your body.

Carry on breathing like this for a while, allowing the breath to come naturally and evenly.

You may notice it takes increased effort to breathe like this at first, but with practice it becomes easier and more natural. You could practice this technique for several minutes, 3 or 4 times each day. If you prefer, you can lie down rather than sit.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR is a process in which we systematically tense and relax the different muscle groups within our bodies. It allows us to become aware of the difference between tension and complete relaxation. You can combine this with diaphragmatic breathing for additional relaxation.

Sit comfortably; make sure you loosen any tight clothing - take off your shoes

Take a few moments to relax, breathing in and out slowly

Shift your attention to your feet - notice how they feel

Slowly tense the muscles - squeeze as tightly as you can and then let go of the tension

Feel the difference, as the tension flows away and the feet become loose and relaxed

When you are ready move to the next muscle group and progress slowly through your body

A sequence to follow could be:

- Feet
- Calves
- Thighs
- Buttocks
- Abdomen
- Hands
- Shoulders
- Face – clenching the teeth & screwing up the eyes

Notice the difference between the relaxed muscle and the tense muscle.

This type of body check can be done at any time we feel muscle tension.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully engaged in the present moment, without analysing or otherwise over thinking the experience. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness helps to focus on what is happening right now.

Mindfulness is not zoning out. It takes effort to maintain the concentration and to bring it back to the present if your mind wanders off or you start to drift. With regular practice mindfulness has been shown to make changes within the brain, strengthening the areas associated with joy and relaxation and weakening those associated with negativity and stress.

Have a try at the following mindfulness techniques:

Body Scan - Body scanning focuses your attention on various parts of your body. Like PMR it starts at your feet and works up. However instead of tensing your muscles and relaxing them you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels without labelling the sensations “good or bad”

Walking meditation - You don't have to be seated to meditate. In this technique mindfulness involves focussing on the physicality of each step – the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breathe whilst moving, the feeling of the sun on your face or the wind against your face.

Mindful eating - If you tend to reach for food when you are stressed, or gulp your meals down, try eating in a mindful way. Sit at a table and focus your full attention on your meal (no TV, papers, eating at your desk) Eat slowly and savour every mouthful. Enjoy the sensations and concentrate on every bite.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery or visualisation is a variation on meditation. It involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace. Choose whatever scene calms you most. It may be a favourite childhood spot, a holiday beach or a special walk. You can do this visualisation exercise on your own or by using an audio recording. There are many of these available in the shops or on the Internet.

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your place. Picture it vividly as though you can see, smell, hear and feel your surroundings. Guided imagery works best if you use as much detail as possible. For example:

- **See** the sun setting over water
- **Hear** the birds singing
- **Smell** the pine trees
- **Feel** the cool water on your bare feet
- **Taste** the fresh clean air

Use relaxation in your everyday life

- Give yourself regular breaks - we all need to recharge our batteries
- Practice adopting a relaxed posture - notice when you are tense, then drop your shoulders and sit back
- Have a warm bath to relax your muscles and calm your mind
- Treat yourself to a massage -this can help to relieve muscle tension and promote relaxation
- Listen to your favourite music
- Practice your breathing techniques –these can be done anywhere
- Plan enjoyable things to look forward to
- If you have had a stressful day, acknowledge that it will take longer to relax and wind down
- Take up a new hobby

Visit the physiotherapy website, click on the Rheumatology icon and enter the “Self -Management Tools” to view “An Introduction to Mindfulness” videos

There are various websites and Apps that offer a range of relaxation techniques, some offer free basic packages some Apps come with a price. Use your internet browser to discover more about these.

Web Address:

<http://www.cht.nhs.uk/services/clinical-services/physiotherapy-outpatients/patient-careinformation/>

QR Code:

Scan the QR code below to take you to our website.



If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

Physiotherapy Department
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MSK physiotherapy Admin Office

Telephone: 01484 905380

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