

Relaxation techniques

Why Is this Important?

Many people with physical health conditions experience physical tension in the body and emotions like anxiety.

Pain and physical discomfort can be a trigger for the fight/flight response. As we know, this is a survival response that prepares our body to respond to the threat. Part of this preparation is that our muscles get tense, our breathing gets faster, our heart races and our blood pressure rises.

All of these symptoms can make pain worse, make us tired or breathless and affect our mood. Physical tension also has wider effects on sleep, appetite and on activity levels, which is why learning how to relax and relieve physical tension in the body can be so helpful for us to feel better.

General Guidelines

- *Relaxation is a skill* - The ability to relax is not always something which comes naturally; it is a skill we need to learn and keep practicing.
- *Decide when to practice* – Aim to bring relaxation practice into your everyday routine.
- *Environment* – Find the most comfortable place to practice, not too hot or chilly, quiet, and with the least chance of being interrupted.
- *'Passive' attitude* – It's natural to wonder if you're doing it "right" but this can keep you from relaxing. Aim to just have a go and see what happens.
- *Breathing* – Breathe through your nose, and settle into a slow and gentle rhythm. Aim to feel your stomach rise a little with each breath rather than your chest.



Relaxation Techniques:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

In progressive muscle relaxation exercises, you tense up your muscles and then relax them, to release any tension they may have been carrying.

People with **diabetes** that experience peripheral neuropathy (pain in nerves of hands and feet), foot ulcers or other painful symptoms should check the movements involved don't cause pain.

It's important to note – **this shouldn't hurt**, so only move as much as feels comfortable for you, and skip this one if you have any existing issues with your muscles or joints.

How to:

1. Once you've set aside the time and place for relaxation, slow down your breathing and give yourself permission to relax.
2. When you are ready to begin, tense your right hand and forearm gently by making a fist with your right hand. Make sure you can feel the tension, but not so much that you feel pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds.
3. Then relax the muscles and keep them relaxed for approximately 10 seconds, noticing the difference in how your muscles feel. It may be helpful to say something like "Relax" as you relax the muscle.
4. Move through each of the muscle groups in the list in the same way.
5. When you have finished the relaxation procedure, remain seated for a few moments allowing yourself to become alert.

Relaxation Sequence

1. Right hand and forearm: Make a fist with your right hand.
2. Right upper arm: Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to "make a muscle".
3. Left hand and forearm.
4. Left upper arm.
5. Forehead: Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go as though you were surprised by something.
6. Eyes and cheeks: Squeeze your eyes tight shut.
7. Mouth and jaw: Open your mouth as wide as you can, as you might when you're yawning.
8. Neck: Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, as though you are looking up to the ceiling.
9. Shoulders: Tense the muscles in your shoulders as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears.
10. Shoulder blades/Back: Push your shoulder blades back, trying to almost touch them together, so that your chest is pushed forward.



11. Chest and stomach: Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs and chest with air.
12. Hips and buttocks: Squeeze your buttock muscles
13. Right upper leg: Tighten your right thigh.
14. Right lower leg: Do this slowly and carefully to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you to stretch the calf muscle.
15. Right foot: Curl your toes downwards.
16. Left upper leg: Repeat as for right upper leg.
17. Left lower leg: Repeat as for right lower leg.
18. Left foot: Repeat as for right foot.

Practice means Progress

Through practice you will become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently is like any training – practising regularly is the key.

Breathing Exercise

Step 1: Relax your shoulders. Place your hands on your stomach with your fingertips just touching. Breathe in through your nose for 2 counts and feel your stomach rise and your fingertips moving apart a little. You might like to imagine your stomach like a balloon inflating.



Step 2: Breathe out through your mouth for 3 counts with pursed lips (like breathing through a straw) and notice your fingertips come closer together again. Imagine that balloon in your stomach deflating and say in your mind, “I am calm”.

Repeat this several times, until this rhythm feels more comfortable and your breathing has become slower.

There may be some days when this is more challenging, particularly if you are feeling tired, tight in the chest or breathless. On days like this, you might want to reduce the counts (breathe in for 1 count and breathe out for 2 counts) so that the exercise is more manageable.

Over time, you will gradually build your skills and you may want to increase the count, perhaps moving up to breathing in for 4 counts and breathing out for 5 counts!