



## **Relaxation: Getting your body to feel safe.**

When we are anxious or stressed, our body changes. Our heart pumps faster, we breathe more rapidly, using only the top part of our lungs. We also start to unconsciously flex or tense our muscles. You may notice aches and pains in your shoulders, jaw, or even the occasional headache as a result. These responses are often referred to as the “fight or flight” response. They are part of our body’s way of preparing us for a physical challenge. Most of us don’t live in the jungle, and do not engage in physical battle, and don’t need to run away from any predators. For this reason, this physical “fight/flight” response has now actually become unhelpful to us as we face stressful situations in modern everyday life. We don’t need swift legs or strong fists to face these modern challenges; we need a clear head.

Relaxation can help you deal with feelings of irritability, anxiety or anger, and reduce muscle tension that can lead to headaches and fatigue. It can also be a way to gain more control over your feelings and stress during difficult moments. The basic aim of relaxation is to use the parts of the body that we DO have direct control over (our lungs, our muscles, and our thoughts) to get control over the parts of our body we DO NOT have direct control over (our heart, our veins, our feelings, etc.). In this way you can stop, and reverse, your body’s “fight/flight” response, so that you can think more clearly.

Relaxation can work very effectively, but it takes time and practice. It is a skill that must be mastered, like any other.

Here are some tips to remember when you are planning to do Relaxation:

1. Relaxation is not hypnosis, or meditation. It is an active process, where you are seeking to gain control of your level of body arousal by controlling (a) your breathing, (b) your muscle tension, and (c) the focus of your attention.
2. Relaxation is more useful to you in stressful situations than in quiet moments. You should plan to practice Relaxing in a range of situations. To begin with, you may find it easier to practice relaxation in a quiet, peaceful environment. This is fine, as long as you plan to try it in other, more active places as you get better at it.
3. Relaxation typically comprises three components: controlled breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualisation. They are probably best learned and mastered one by one, beginning with controlled breathing. Once you have gotten used to all three, you can do them at the same time.



## **Controlled breathing**

- To begin with, find a comfortable seat, in which you can sit upright, with your arms resting either in your lap or by your side. You don't need to lie down. Get yourself into a position where you won't need to move too much: uncross legs, feet flat on the floor, overall in a resting position.
- Focus your attention on your breathing. Your aim is to breathe using your belly, rather than your shoulders or rib cage. As you breathe in, your shoulders and ribs should not move. Instead, your belly will bulge out a little to fit the air in the bottom of your lungs. When you first try this, it may be a little disconcerting, and may take a bit of practice. You may find it helps to practice this first standing side-on in front of a mirror. As you breathe out, you should feel your belly contracting – your ribs and shoulders will not move. Then, as you breathe in, you should feel your belly expanding outwards, almost as if you are a bit pregnant.
- Once you have got the hang of belly breathing, it's time to get your breathing rate and depth right. You should breathe either in or out about once every five seconds. Practice it. Breathe in, counting “two thousand, three thousand, four thousand” in your head, then breathe out, “two thousand, three thousand, four thousand, five thousand”. To get your breathing rate right, you may find yourself holding your breath, or wanting to gasp air in. You might find yourself yawning. Holding your breath is fine, but try not to yawn. Don't worry about 'not breathing enough'. It is physically impossible for you to suffocate yourself simply by slowing or even stopping your breathing. Remember, you are trying to slow your breathing down, so your body might initially try to resist this.
- Don't take deep breaths. This is a myth about relaxation. The aim is to breathe gently, slowly, and with your belly. As you breathe out, breathe out *completely*, squeezing every last bit of air out of the bottom of your lungs.
- After you've got the hang of it, you might find it also helps to think “in” as you breathe in, and then quietly say “relax” to yourself as you breathe out. Then you can let your mind start to wander, and you are ready to shift your attention to your toes.



### Progressive muscle relaxation

- Wiggle your toes. Then curl your toes, feeling the muscles in your toes tighten. Curl them hard, as hard as you can, and hold that for the count of five, as you breathe in. Then relax your toes completely, feeling the muscles in your toes go floppy and loose as you let all the tension go from them. It often helps to imagine the tension as energy flowing out of the tips of your toes.
- Now move your attention to your feet. Can you feel your feet? Flex them upwards towards your knees, holding for five, then relax them, letting the energy flow out the tips of your toes.
- Repeat this, working your way up one by one through your calves, thighs, shrugging your shoulders, flexing your arms, your wrists, clenching your fists, and finally scrunching and frowning your facial muscles. Each time, focus on releasing all tension from the muscles you are working on, and periodically check to ensure your breathing is still under control.

### Visualisation

- When you are relaxed, your mind becomes a bit like a river, with images, scenes, thoughts and memories flowing along it. As you become more relaxed, this river will flow more and more of its own accord, and you will find it easier to let these thoughts and images flow through your mind *unimpeded*. If bothersome thoughts or images intrude, let them go, allowing new thoughts to flow in. If you start to feel anxious, focus on your breathing.