



# Simple Relaxation

## How do you know if you are tense?

Strange to say, but it is the case that we can be so habitually tense, almost without realising it, that we gradually become accustomed to the sensations of living in a tense state and just think of it as 'normal'.

So here are some clues that may help you to spot undue levels of tension:

- tense muscles
- heart racing or pounding
- hyperventilating; feeling light-headed or faint
- persistent tiredness or exhaustion
- aches and pains
- difficulty with sleeping or gritting your teeth at night
- waking up tired
- loss of appetite or not eating well, perhaps with our stomach 'in knots'
- developing minor ailments such as headaches, migraines or stomach upsets
- mind in a whirl; can't think straight, concentrate or work effectively
- sense of rush and pressure, lack of time.

These symptoms can also be caused by other medical problems, so if you are unsure, it is worth checking this out with your GP.

Whilst some tension can help in the short-term by making us alert, or by motivating us to get on with something, in the longer-term it can begin to cause problems with our health, and in time our work and relationships are also likely

to suffer. Generally, the more relaxed you are the better your mind works and the more capable and adaptable you can be.

## **Which approach to relaxation?**

There are many approaches to learning to relax; none is 'right' for everyone – it is more a matter of finding an approach that makes sense and works for you. Learning to relax muscle groups physically, learning mental relaxation, meditation, yoga, prayer, biofeedback – all are possible approaches. As our body is not disconnected from our mind and our emotions, it is possible to use any of these starting points to benefit our entire being.

Like exercising in order to get fit, doing relaxation exercises once won't make you 'fit': learning to relax takes time and practice in order for you to become proficient.

## **A simple physical relaxation technique**

Here is one simple physical method which is designed to be useful in everyday situations: it doesn't aim at deep relaxation or require you to lie down for half an hour! Rather, it aims to reduce unnecessary levels of tension, so that you can continue with your current activity more effectively. It can be used just about anywhere – sitting in a lecture theatre or examination, walking down the street, or going to sleep in bed.

### *How it works*

In the early part of this century it was recognised that when people first tense up and then relax muscle groups, they end up more relaxed than when they began. In fact this is a natural process that we all use, for example, when we stretch or yawn.

But the key to this particular method lies in two factors:

- that we learn the difference in the sensations of being tense and being relaxed, and
- that it gives signals to the subconscious and ‘automatic’ parts of our system (the autonomic nervous system) that ‘all is well’, ‘there is no need to be tense any longer’, and it is your autonomic nervous system which will do the real work by slowing down your heart rate, stopping the release of adrenaline into your blood stream, etc. – things which we do not normally have under our conscious control.

Hence the exercises themselves are deceptively simple. Don’t be fooled – they do work; but like all relaxation methods, it takes time and practice for this to be useful in real-life stressful situations.

### *The method*

For each of the areas of the body described, it is suggested that you tense up and then relax muscle groups. Do each exercise three times. As you get better with time at relaxing these areas, try using less tension before relaxing.

### *Hands*

Hands are commonly one of the first parts of our body to show tension. When they tense up, they tend to either clench up into a fist, or hold tight onto something, such as the arm of a chair, or to clasp each other.

Instead, try stretching out your hands so that your fingers are straight and spread out. Hold that position for a moment and feel the tension across your palms and the back of your hands. Then let your hands relax and flop beside you, or on your lap. Resist the urge to hold onto something; just let them hang loosely beside you, or let them rest in your lap.

When hands are relaxed, the fingers are gently curved, neither tightly curled nor straight, and are 'floppy', not stiff.

### *Shoulders*

When we are tense our shoulders are commonly raised, i.e. hunched. Instead, pull your shoulders down; feel the tension under your arms and up your neck. Hold that position for a moment. Then let them relax and return to a natural position (i.e. not hunched).

### *Head and neck*

The neck muscles can only relax when they don't have to support the weight of your head – i.e. if you are lying comfortably with your head supported in a straight line with your spine, or, if you are standing or sitting, with your head balanced and looking straight ahead – neither angled to one side, nor looking up or down.

Academics and people who work at desks or keyboards tend to spend a lot of time looking down, either reading, typing or writing, or looking through a microscope. So instead, try looking right up, and feel the tension in your neck; then allow your head to return to the straight ahead, balanced position.

### *Face*

There are many muscles in our face – used, of course, for speaking, eating, facial expression... This is one of the areas most likely to show tension. As with other muscle groups, it is possible to tense up and then relax these muscles. However, do not do this if you wear either contact lenses or dentures as they could be damaged. So here is an alternative method, which has

the additional advantage of being less obtrusive in company.

Let all the expression go from your face: let your forehead become smooth, your jaw sag with your teeth just apart (though your lips may still be closed), your eyes looking straight ahead and into the distance, and not squinting.

It may help you to do this if you think of a word which describes this particular expression – ‘vacant’; ‘empty’; ‘relaxed’; ‘gormless’ are some possibilities! Put this particular expression on your face.

### *Breathing*

When you are tense, your breathing tends to become faster and shallower. So, allow your breathing to come from lower down in your abdomen (this doesn’t mean inhaling a lot of air – rather, just a little air, but from low down) and this will help you to slow your breathing down a little (but don’t actually hold your breath). Let it become gentle, easy and regular. Once it is comfortable, you may be able to slow your breathing a little more.

[Some people find that thinking about their breathing is counterproductive as it increases anxiety. If you find this applies to you, just omit this section.]

### **Relaxing thoughts**

Although the physical relaxation method described above doesn’t aim for deep relaxation, it should nonetheless help you to relax mentally too. It isn’t possible to be really relaxed physically while being tense mentally, or vice versa. However, here are some suggestions which may help further with mental relaxation.

*Replace stressful thinking with pleasant and relaxing thoughts*

One approach is to turn your mind away from stressful thoughts and situations, and instead think about something pleasant. This is a form of 'day-dreaming' which you can turn to your advantage.

Imagine somewhere, real or imaginary, that you would like to be and where you can relax and put aside the cares of the world for a little while; gradually begin to imagine the details of this place, the sights, sounds, smells. Imagine yourself 'unwinding; and 'recharging your batteries'. Then gradually return to your current world, but bring the new found feelings of life and energy back with you ,so that you can use them in your current circumstances.

It is the last part of this technique – bringing your re-found energy back to apply in the present – which is the important bit. [Merely imagining pleasant places may give some respite from current difficulties, but can too easily become an avoidance of the present circumstances.]

*Thinking about something stressful while practising physical relaxation*

Taking the above approach further: once you are physically relaxed, try imagining yourself in a situation that you feel tense about, and then focus again on relaxing. Alternate your attention between the tense situation and relaxation, until you can remain relaxed while thinking about this situation. In this way you can 'rehearse' for a coming stressful exam, interview or presentation mentally before you have to face it in reality.

For example, in order to prepare for a coming examination, first relax physically, then imagine yourself revising for the examination. When you can do this and still remain relaxed, begin to introduce thoughts about *the day before* the exam whilst practising remaining relaxed. Then think about *going to* the examination, and eventually imagine yourself *doing the*

examination, all whilst remaining relaxed enough to work well.

N.B *Imagining* yourself revising, etc. is not a substitute for *actually* revising!

Nonetheless, this is a proven approach to improving one's performance: it is similar to the visualisations techniques that sports psychologists teach athletes to use as an aid to improving their performance.

## **Relaxation and sleep**

Relaxing is not the same as sleeping. Many people sleep without being very relaxed, and although relaxing can lead one to yawn or feel sleepy, it need not lead to sleep.

Learning to relax can certainly help you to get to sleep more easily, and then to sleep more restfully. Use the physical relaxation exercises described earlier when you are ready for sleep.

Some other suggestions that may help with sleeping are~:

- don't use your bed as a place to work during the day
- stop working some while before you want to sleep
- put your work books etc. out of sight of your bed
- develop a routine prior to going to bed
- once in bed, get as comfortable as possible
- yawn! 'Artificial' yawns are just as good as the real thing in helping you slow down your breathing, and at releasing the fluid between your eyelids which will enable them to stay closed all night. Having yawned, keep your eyes gently closed.

### *Stop thinking altogether*

To quieten all thoughts and leave an empty mind is very difficult, but if thoughts are going round and round in your mind as you attempt to sleep, try these ideas:

- first, use the physical relaxation techniques described above
- with your eyes gently closed, look straight ahead and 'stare into space' as if looking at a distant, unmoving spot. Just keep looking at this distant black spot
- if your thoughts still won't stop, try focusing on your breathing and gently slowing it down
- or imagine your thoughts as images on a black screen,, which you can 'wipe out' with a board rubber.

### **Building relaxation into everyday life**

For these techniques to be of real use, you will need to build them into your everyday life, so that when something very stressful comes along, you are already thoroughly practised in the skills of relaxation and can put them to good use in the midst of difficulty. The day of an examination, interview or presentation is not the day to begin practising.

As time goes by, you will probably find that you are more readily aware of any signs of tension in your body. As you become more alert to the early warning signs in your body, you can begin to relax before tension becomes a major problem.

You may become so proficient that you do not need to tense up muscle groups prior to relaxing them – the tensing stage is not actually necessary, but was introduced as an easier method for beginners. You may find in time that you can simply relax at will.

You cannot overdose on these exercises; nor are they in any way harmful or addictive. They simply make good use of a natural process.

Practice when life is going well, and then gradually build it into more stressful events. Incorporate it into all aspects of your life and then you will be well able to keep disabling tension at bay when stressful events arise.

### **When you could use some additional support**

If you want further help with learning to relax, or to apply this in stressful circumstances, you could do one of the following:

- join a relaxation training course
- speak to your College or Practice Nurse
- consider spiritual approaches such as prayer or meditation; your College Chaplain, Church or other faith centre should be able to point you in a helpful direction
- look at other leaflets in this series, which may also be relevant
- arrange an appointment at the University Staff Counselling Service.

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