

Relaxing...¹

What is Relaxation training?

Relaxation is a voluntary letting go of tension. This tension can be physical tension in the muscles or it can be psychological tension. When we physically relax, the impulses arising in the various nerves in the muscles change the nature of the signals that are sent to the brain. This change brings about a general feeling of calm, both physically and mentally. Muscle relaxation has a widespread effect on the nervous system and therefore should be seen as a physical treatment, as well as a psychological one.

Importance of Relaxation Training

Muscles are designed to remain in a relaxed state until required to perform some physical activity. In normal circumstances, a person would show fluctuating patterns of tension and relaxation over the course of the day.

The fight or flight response also results in muscle tension. When people feel under stress for long periods of time they seldom allow the muscle tension levels to become deactivated, and excessive muscle tension may become constant. Eventually, these people become unable to relax or cannot recognise tension: In fact, the tension may appear to be almost relaxed compared with panic attacks. The tension no longer helps them perform their daily tasks, and may even hinder normal activities. Because of the tension, these people may feel jumpy, irritable, tired, or apprehensive, or experience frequent headaches and muscle pain.

A continual state of tension makes it easier for a panic attack to occur because the nervous system is already highly aroused. In this case, some minor event, such as an unexpected encounter with a friend, can trigger further tension that can lead to hyperventilation and panic. Even if you do not have panic attacks, you are more likely to feel anxious, constantly apprehensive, or have unpleasant obsessive worries when your body is in a continual state of tension.

Some tension can be good for you, so it is important to learn to discriminate when tension is useful and when it is unnecessary. Actually, much everyday tension is unnecessary. Only a few muscles are involved in maintaining normal posture, for example, sitting, standing, and walking. Occasionally, an increase in tension is extremely beneficial. For example, it is usually helpful to tense up when you are about to receive a serve in a tennis game. Likewise, it is helpful to tense up and become more alert before a job interview: This tension helps you perform at your best. Do not become frightened of this type of tension.

¹ Andrews, G., Crino, R., Hunt, C., Lampe, L. & Page, A. (1998). *The treatment of anxiety disorders: Clinician's guide and patient manuals*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

The tension is unnecessary 1) when it performs no useful alerting function, 2) when it is too high for the activity involved, or 3) when it remains high after the activating situation has passed.

Components of Relaxation Training

In order to be more in control of your anxiety, emotions, and general physical well-being it is important to learn to relax. To do this you need to:

- *Learn to recognise tension*
- *Learn to relax your body*
- *Learn to let tension go in specific muscles*

Recognizing Tension

In order to recognize tension more readily; you should become aware of where in your body you tend to experience tension, and the characteristics of this tension – for example, pain, soreness, weakness, or tiredness of muscles. Note also which events in your life or within yourself tend to result in an increase in tension.

RELAXATION TRAINING

Progressive Relaxation

Progressive muscular relaxation is a form of relaxation that will help you develop more control over your state of tension. In progressive relaxation, the muscles are relaxed in such a progressive manner, working your way around the body. You will learn to better recognize and voluntarily reduce muscle tension. A state of relaxation has flow-on effects that lower blood pressure and heart rate, reduce the rate of respiration, allow a feeling of tranquility, and reduce the output of hormones that promote the flight or fight response.

Relaxation is a skill that is learned through regular practice. To achieve the full benefits you will need to commit yourself to at least eight weeks of daily practice. It is our experience that people who benefit most from relaxation either practice regularly, or practice immediately when they notice any increase in tension or anxiety. Do not despair if you do not reach deep level of relaxation during your early sessions- this can only be achieved through patience and practice. The more frequently you practice relaxation, the deeper the relaxation will be, the longer lasting the effect and the more quickly that anxiety can be reduced.

Relaxation exercises should be done at least once per day to begin with, preferably before any activity that might prove difficult. It is important that you have nothing external to think about while you are relaxing. Therefore, if you are expecting a phone call, leave the phone off the hook; likewise, don't start cooking just before relaxing if something might boil over. When you are relaxing, you can be comfortably aware that any distractions that occur are

not important and don't require your attention. Explaining the exercises to those you live with, and perhaps playing the tape to them, will generally lessen any embarrassment and aid in cooperation in minimizing interruptions.

Select a comfortable chair or seated position with good support for your head and shoulders. Some people prefer to do the exercises lying down, but do not use this position if you are likely to fall asleep: You cannot learn to relax while asleep. If you do want some method to put you to sleep, go over the relaxation exercises in your mind or keep a relaxation tape specifically for this purpose.

With time and practice, you will find that you can relax even in less than ideal circumstances, and in a variety of postures and situations. Generally, you should not practice deep muscle relaxation while performing activities that require a high degree of alertness, for example, driving a car or operating a machine. Instead, use one of the isometric exercises described further on.

After you have finished the relaxation tape, don't jump up right away. First, you might feel momentarily dizzy and misinterpret this normal reaction as a sign of some other problem. Also, you might get straight back into the old habit of tensing. Get up slowly and try to preserve the state of relaxation for as long as possible.

ISOMETRIC RELAXATION

Isometric relaxation exercises involve tensing and relaxation of muscles without overt movement. They provide a technique of rapid relaxation that can be applied in a wide variety of everyday situations. Because they do not involve any obvious change in posture or movement, they can be done quite unobtrusively, even when in company. In the early stages of training, you may have to do these exercises several times per day to counteract the tension and maintain a relaxed state, particularly when under stress. As you improve, they will take less time and become easier. Eventually, you will find that you are doing them without thinking- that is, they may well become a habit that you will use automatically to counter tension.

ISOMETRIC RELAXATION: BASIC TECHNIQUE

1. Take a small breath and hold it for up to 7 seconds
2. At the same time, gradually tense a chosen muscle group
3. After 7 seconds breath out, and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself
4. Gradually let all the tension go from your muscles
5. If desired, close your eyes
6. For the next minute, each time you breathe out say the word 'relax' to yourself and let the tension flow out of your muscles.
7. Repeat if necessary with the same or other muscle groups until you feel relaxed.

Skill Pointers

- Relaxing is a skill- it improves with frequent and regular practice.

- Do the exercises immediately, whenever you notice yourself becoming tense.
- Develop the habit of reacting to tension by relaxing.
- Gradually tense and relax the muscles. Slow and gentle is the rule.
- Do not tense your muscles to the point of discomfort or hold the tension for longer than 7 seconds

Isometric relaxation exercises can be done anywhere; anytime- this is your portable form of relaxation. Note where you feel tension, and devise exercises that will alternate tense and relax the affected muscles. Some examples are given.

- While sitting, slowly tense leg muscles by crossing your feet at the ankles and pressing down with the upper leg while trying to lift the lower leg, or try to pull legs in opposite directions
- Place hands on the side of a chair and pull into the chair.
- While standing, lock legs stiffly straight, then release.
- Facial muscles can be tense and relaxed in a variety of ways, often by exaggerating different expressions, for example smiling, frowning, surprise.

DIFFICULTIES WITH RELAXATION

Some people report that they cannot relax. Since all human beings share similar biological make-up, there is usually no purely physiological reason why relaxation should work for some people and not others. The reason that relaxation may not work for some people is usually due to some psychological factor or insufficient practice. These problems can be overcome if you really want to relax. If you are experiencing difficulty relaxing, you should discuss this problem with your therapist. Some examples of difficulties are given below.

"I am too tense to relax"

In this case, the individual uses the very symptom that needs treating as an excuse for not relaxing. Relaxation may take longer than expected, but there is no reason why someone should have to remain tense. It might be useful to consider whether there is some other factor getting in the way of relaxation.

"I can't find the time or place"

Be adaptive. If you can't find 20 minutes, find 10 minutes somewhere in the day to relax. If you do have a private room at work, go to a park. Relax in the evening, while your partner is reading the paper – you do not have to be alone to relax. Don't choose a time when you would prefer to be with friends elsewhere, for example, don't choose to relax at lunch if you would prefer to be with friends. If you keep making the excuse that there's no time, you may need to consider whether other factors are preventing you from relaxing.

"It feels unnatural"

If you have been very tense for a long time, relaxing may well feel unnatural. Through relaxation, you will begin to re-educate your muscles to be more relaxed, and you will also become more aware of the difference between a tense and a relaxed state. At first, this change may feel unusual. Give yourself time to make adjust.

"I'm not getting anything out of this"

Unfortunately, many people expect too much too soon from relaxation training. You cannot expect to undo years of habitual tensing in a few relaxation sessions. Give the training time to take effect. Set long-term goals, rather than monitor your improvement day by day.