

Controlling the Bodily Feeling of Anxiety

Relaxation

Whenever we are anxious or stressed, the muscles in our bodies tense. When muscles become too tense, we experience uncomfortable sensations such as headache, stiff neck, painful shoulders, tight chest, difficulty in breathing and trembling, tingling hands and face, back pain..... and more.

These sensations can make us even more anxious, which in turn, increases muscular tension. The result is a spiral of worsening tension which can become increasingly distressing.

The most effective way of controlling bodily tension is by relaxing. Relaxing isn't just a matter of sitting in front of the television or having a hobby (although these recreations are important too), you need to develop a skill which will enable you to reduce unnecessary physical tension whenever you need to. You can then use this skill to relieve anxiety and the associated unpleasant bodily sensations in a variety of situations. Furthermore, when your body is free of tension, your mind tends to be relaxed, too.

The ability to relax does not always come easily, it is a skill which has to be learned by progressing through a series of structured exercises. The following routines are designed to help you to learn to relax in a series of steps. The first two are quite long and you may find that taped instructions are helpful.

General guide-lines

- Before doing the exercise, decide when you will practice, and try to keep to this time each day so that you develop a routine.
- Practice two to three times a day: the more you practice the more easily you will be able to relax.
- Choose somewhere quiet to exercise where no one will disturb you. Do not attempt your exercise if you are hungry or have just eaten, or if the room is too hot or too chilly. This will make it more difficult to relax.
- Start the exercise by lying down in a comfortable position wearing comfortable clothes. Later, you can also practice relaxation while sitting or standing.

- Try to adopt a passive attitude, ie do not worry about your performance or whether you are successfully relaxing. Just have a go and let it happen.
- Breathing: try to breathe through your nose, filling your lungs completely so that you feel your stomach muscles stretch. Breathe slowly and regularly and do not take a lot of quick, deep breathes as this can make feel dizzy or faint. If you place your hands on your stomach, you will feel movement there if you are breathing properly. Try this out before you exercise to make sure you are used to the feeling.
- Record your progress because you need to know if relaxation is working for you. Expect day to day variation in your ability to relax- we all have days when it comes easily and other days when relaxation is more difficult.

The Exercises

As you will not to be able to relax and read the instructions very easily, first read through all the exercises to get familiar with the routines. Then you can start to work through the four exercises which get progressively shorter. When you are able to relax using the first exercise move on to the second, then the third and finally learn exercise four, which is a rapid relaxation routine. This whole process should be done over several weeks. The precise length of time needed will vary from person to person. Only move to the next exercise when you can really relax at the end of a routine as there is nothing to be gained by rushing through the program.

1. Progressive muscular relaxation

This first exercise will help you to distinguish between tense and relaxed muscles, so that you can recognize when you are tense and then relax in response to this. The basic movement which you use at every stage of the exercise is as follows. First tense your muscles gently, really concentrating on the feelings of tension and strain. Hold this for about 5 seconds and then let go of the tension and strain. Hold this for about five seconds and then let go of the tension for about 10-15 seconds. Discover how your muscles feel when you are relax them. Focus on the sensations in the different parts of your body. The relaxation exercise involves doing this for all parts of your body.

The procedure

- FEET Pull your toes back, tense the muscles in your feet. Relax and repeat.
- LEGS Straighten your legs, point your toes toward your face. Relax and repeat
- ABDOMEN Tense your stomach muscles by pulling them in and up. Relax and repeat
- BACK Arch your back. Relax and repeat
- SHOULDERS AND NECK Shrug your shoulders firmly, bringing them up and in. Press your head back. Relax and repeat
- ARMS Stretch out your arms and hand. Relax and repeat
- FACE Tense your forehead and jaw. Lower your eyebrows and bite. Relax and repeat
- WHOLE BODY Tense your entire body. Feet, legs, abdomen, back, shoulders and neck, arms and face. Hold the tension for a few seconds. Relax and repeat

NOTE: Breathe slowly and regularly between each stage in the procedure and during the exercise.

If, when you reach the end of the routine, you still feel tense then go through it again. If only parts of your body feel tense, repeat the exercise just in those areas. When you have finished the exercise, spend a few moments relaxing your mind. Think about something restful-whatever scene or image works best for you. Breathe slowly through your nose, filling your lungs completely. Continue for a minute or two then open your eyes. Do not stand up straight away, and when you are ready, move *slowly* and stretch *gently*.

2. Shortened Progressive Relaxation

You can shorten the routine by missing out the “tense” stage, going through the routine by systematically relaxing the different muscle groups. When you can do this you can adapt the routine to use at other times and in other places. For example, you might try the exercise sitting down rather than in an lying position: or you might move from a quiet bedroom to the living area, which is not so peaceful. In this way, you will be learning to relax in a range of environments, which is what you need for real life coping.

3. *Simple relaxation routine*

This is an even shorter exercise which you can practice as you become more experienced at achieving the relaxed state. For this exercise, you will need to imagine a soothing, restful mental image to use during the routine. Your mental image will help you to relax even more effectively. It can be:

- A sound or word which you find relaxing such as the word 'calm' or the sound of the sea.
- A particular object which is restful, perhaps a picture or an ornament you particularly like.
- A scene in which you find calming, such as a quiet country scene or a deserted beach.

The procedure

- Sit in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Imagine your body growing heavier and more relaxed.
- Breathe through your nose and become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out think about your mental image, while breathing easily and naturally.
- Don't worry whether or not you are good with the exercise, simply let go of your tensions and relax at your own pace. Distracting thoughts will probably come into your mind. Don't worry about this and don't dwell on them, simply return to thinking about your mental image or your breathing pattern.
- Keep this going for 10-20 minutes. When you finish sit quietly with your eyes closed for a few minutes, and then sit with your eyes open. Don't stand up or begin moving around quickly.

With practice you will be able to respond to stress by relaxing almost automatically.

4. Cued relaxation

When you are able to relax using exercises 1-3, you can begin to use your relaxations skills throughout the day and not just designated 'relaxation time'. In this way you will

regain the ability to relax at will whenever it is necessary. All you need is something that will catch your eye regularly and remind you to:

- Drop your shoulders
- Un-tense the muscles in your body
- Check your breathing
- Relax

As a cue or reminder you might use a small, colored spot on your watch or something else which you look at regularly during the day. Every time you see the cue you will be reminded to relax and you will be practicing your relaxation skills several times throughout the day. There are all sorts of cues in which you might use- work out what catches your eye frequently and use as a reminder.

With time and regular practice relaxation will become a way of life. You are bound to experience stress anxiety and tension at sometime this is normal-but you will now have a better awareness of your tension and the skills to bring it under control.