

Relaxation

Relaxation is a skill that can be very helpful for dealing with tension related to depression and anxiety.

It can help you to reduce general day-to-day anxiety. Relaxation can help you to cope when you are anxious about going into a difficult situation. It can also help you to relax so that it is easier for you to fall asleep.

Focusing on the relaxation techniques can also be helpful when you are bothered by negative thoughts going around in your head. The techniques decrease the tension, and also help to distract you from the thoughts and the situation.

We are going to learn and practice three types of relaxation:

1. Progressive muscle relaxation
2. Imaging exercises
3. Breathing techniques

Learning to Relax

While relaxing may seem like a pretty easy thing to do, a lot of people have difficulty actually getting themselves to do it regularly and successfully.

Different people relax in different ways. Some people meditate, and others do martial arts. Some people find that playing sports or working out at the gym helps them to relax. Others prefer to play or listen to music. These activities require energy and motivation, and often get forgotten when people become depressed.

One of the difficult things about relaxing is getting your mind and body to cooperate! Many people who are depressed find that their muscles become tense and they get pain around their neck and shoulders. This can interfere with sleep and concentration, as well as contribute to a general feeling of discomfort.

The goal of this section is not to show you exactly what to do to get your body and mind to relax. You need to work that out for yourself by trying different techniques and seeing what works for you.

(Relaxation, continued)

This session will merely provide a couple of starting points and suggestions from which you can start to develop your relaxation skills.

There are several other sources that you may find helpful. There are several books on relaxation techniques that are available in most bookstores. There are also tapes and videos that teach people specific techniques. Tai Chi, Yoga, and other meditative arts are more complex but very rewarding ways to learn discipline and focus as well as relaxation of your body and mind.

Getting Started

Learning relaxation involves figuring out what is going to give you the best chance of success - otherwise you probably won't keep trying to do it.

There are some things that you can do to increase the probability that you will feel relaxed when you practice the techniques.

Finding a quiet, comfortable area where you feel safe is an important first step. If you are always hearing people close by, or if you are constantly expecting someone to walk in, it is going to be much more difficult for you to relax. This is particularly true if you are someone who often feels anxious or shy.

Making yourself physically comfortable is a good second step. If you are too cold or too hot, or if you are lying on hard ground, you are likely to spend more time focused on how uncomfortable you are than you will on the relaxation techniques. Wear comfortable clothes that aren't too tight or too bulky. Dress in clothing that will keep you at a comfortable temperature. Lie or sit on a comfortable sofa or on an exercise mat on the floor. Give yourself room to move around if you need to do so.

(Getting Started, continued)

The third important step is to remember that relaxation is a skill that takes practice to learn and maintain. If you do it regularly, it becomes easier to get yourself into a relaxed state, and you are also more likely to be able to get your body to relax when it is really tense. Fitting time into your schedule to practice relaxation may seem like work, but it will pay off in the long run.

Remember the three key things to help you with relaxation:

1. Find a safe, quiet place.
2. Make yourself comfortable.
3. Practice regularly.

Muscle Relaxation

Have you ever noticed that immediately after you finish doing a strenuous activity you feel a sense of warmth in the muscles you were using as they start to relax? This is because using your muscles requires creating tension in them as they work. Once the work stops, the muscles should relax.

Feel the difference in the muscle in your upper arm when you flex your biceps (the muscles on the front of your upper arm) like a weight-lifter showing off, versus when your arm is relaxed and hanging at your side. The contracted muscle should be firm and tight, whereas the relaxed muscle should be soft and loose. A cramp is a spasm that causes the muscle to contract hard when it is not needed.

Often people keep the muscles in their shoulders, neck and upper back tense when they are anxious or depressed. The tension in the neck and upper back is often responsible for "tension headaches", since the top portions of these groups of muscles attach to your skull.

(Muscle Relaxation, continued)

Muscle relaxation techniques use the normal properties of muscles to

help you teach them to relax more completely. They focus on teaching you to learn the muscle groups, create tension in them, and then relax them. If you do this regularly, you will gradually learn to tell the difference between tense and relaxed muscles.

Practice the muscle relaxation for all the different muscle groups in your body. Most people find that they feel generally more relaxed afterwards. It may take practice, however!

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

(Adapted from Edmund J. Bourne's *Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*)

- 1) Take three deep breaths in and out.
- 2) Clench your fists gently and hold them for 10 seconds and then let go. Rest for 20 seconds and use relaxing self talk.
- 3) Tighten your biceps by bending your arms and pulling towards your shoulders (like Popeye!), hold for 10 seconds and release.
- 4) Tighten your triceps by straightening your arms and locking your elbows, hold and release.
- 5) Raise your eyebrows as high as you can, hold and relax.

(Muscle Relaxation, continued)

- 6) Shut your eyes tightly, hold and relax.
- 7) Open your mouth as widely as you can, hold and relax.
- 8) Lean your head gently towards your back to tighten the muscles in the back of your neck (do not do this if you have rheumatoid arthritis!).
- 9) Raise up your shoulders to your ears like a shrug, hold and release.
- 10) Push your shoulders back towards each other, hold and release.
- 11) Tighten your stomach muscles, hold and release.
- 12) Arch your lower back up, hold and release.
- 13) Tighten your buttocks, hold and relax.
- 14) Tighten the muscles in your hips and thighs, hold and relax.
- 15) Tighten shin muscles by pulling your toes towards you, hold and relax.
- 16) Tighten calf muscles by pointing your toes down, hold and relax.
- 17) Go back over your muscle groups for and check for tension, and repeat the exercises in areas that remain tense.

Imaging Exercises

Imaging exercises are used in different ways, but the primary goal is to shift your focus from the stresses of the outside world to a safe place where your mind and body are free to relax.

Sounds hokey, right?

It may sound that way, but it works for many people. Some people are able to create this safe image in their mind, and others may need to use tapes of sounds, music or instructions to help them. These ideas are very similar to the techniques used in self-hypnosis. Some people may find that it is just not the right technique to help them relax. Everyone is different.

Imagine yourself in a peaceful safe place - anywhere that appeals to you. It can be real or imaginary. Using the same image over and over will make it familiar, and you will spend less time trying to fill in the image, and more time working at relaxing!

(Imaging, continued)

Focus on the scene and all the details in the image. The goal is to make you focus completely on the image, and the best way to do this is by getting right "into" the picture. For example, if there is a tree in your image, you can imagine the leaves and the colours and the veins in the leaves and the sounds of the wind in the leaves. Or you could focus on the bark and the colours and the contours of the cracks in the bark. Try and use all your senses (What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel? What do you taste?)

You can plan the scene out ahead of time and write it down, or you can record the description on a tape.

Some people find that using calm music or nature sounds helps them to do the imaging exercises more successfully.

Creating Your Image

Describe a safe, comfortable place:

What are some of the things you see around you?

What are you doing? Sitting, standing, lying down? Where? On what?

What do you hear? What do you smell? What do you feel against your skin?

Breathing Review

One of the most important factors in learning to relax and in learning to control anxiety is finding ways to control your breathing. There are many ways to do this.

Abdominal breathing is a technique that focuses on using your diaphragm to make sure that your lungs are fully expanding, and that you are not just using the top part of your lungs to breathe. Singers use this technique to get maximum air volume.

Put one hand on your upper chest and the other on your abdomen. Breathe in deeply.

Which hand moved out?

If you are breathing properly your lower hand should have moved out, as the muscle below your lungs (your diaphragm) moves out expanding your lungs.

“Box” Breathing

“Box” breathing is a technique used for helping people with panic attacks to control their breathing and stop or minimize the extent of their panic.

When people become anxious they usually do one of two things:

- 1) They hold their breath, or
- 2) They breathe too fast.

For this reason, we tell everybody to start by breathing all the way out, so that their lungs are relatively empty to start the exercise.

The next part of the exercise involves breathing in a controlled manner, in this case by breathing in and out slowly, and maintaining a pattern to the breathing. This pattern involves doing the following:

- a) Breathe in slowly for a count of 4
- b) Hold your breath in for a count of 4
- c) Breathe out slowly for a count of 4
- d) Hold your breath out for a count of 4

