Supported Self Help Sessions

Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise is all about relaxing your body. When we get stressed or anxious our brain sends messages to the body to prepare for action, to fight or run away usually. This can result in the muscles of the body becoming tense. Learning to relax the muscles helps to alleviate this tension and calms our minds as well.

First find a comfortable sitting position, turn off your phone/music/TV, close the door, make time and space to relax. It may sound counter intuitive, but in this exercise to relax muscle groups you will first put them in a state of exaggerated tension. You should start with the feet, and then work up the body, tensing and relaxing groups of muscles in turn. As you tense each muscle group, take a slow deep inward breath while you hold the muscle tense, count to five in your head, and then breathe out, and imagine breathing out the tension in the muscle as you relax.

So taking each muscle group in turn:

- Begin by tensing your feet. Push your heels into the floor and point your toes upwards. Take a slow deep breath in and hold it, counting to five: one, two, three, four, five, and release both breath and tension.
- Now your lower legs. With your toes on the floor raise your heels and press your toes into the floor, breathe in and hold the position. Count to five, then release and relax.
- Upper legs. Stretch out your legs, lifting both feet slightly off the ground, tensing your thigh muscles. Breathe in: one, two, three, four, five, and relax.
- Hips and buttocks. Squeeze your buttocks together. Take a slow deep breath in, hold it, breathe out and relax.
- Your chest and stomach. Slowly breath in pushing out your abdomen, filling your lungs with air, and hold: one, two, three, four, five, and release.
- And now your back. Push your shoulder blades back, as if you were trying to touch them together, nice deep breath in, count to five and relax.
- Now your shoulders. Lift your shoulders up to your ears, like a tortoise going into its shell, breathe in and hold it for five and breathe out the tension.
- Your neck, do this one carefully and gently. Look ahead and slowly and carefully roll your head back to look at the ceiling. Breathe in slowly, and as you breathe out roll your head forward gently and relax.
- Your jaw. Open your mouth wide as if you were yawning, breathe in, hold it for five, and relax.
- Your face and eyes. Squeeze your eyes tightly shut, scrunching up your lips to try to meet your nose. Deep breath in: one, two, three, four, five, and relax.
- Forehead and scalp. Raise your eyebrows as if you're surprised, breathe in: one, two, three, four, five, and relax.
- Your hands and forearms. Make fists with your hands and squeeze tight. Take a deep breath in: one, two, three, four, five, and relax.
- And lastly your upper arm. Make a fist again, less tightly, and raise your forearm to your shoulder to tense your bicep. Hold it there and take a nice deep breath in: one, two, three, four, five, and relax and let your arms hang at your sides.

When you have finished, remain sitting still for a moment, to enjoy the feeling of full body relaxation, and to recover before you resume your day. Like any exercise this one will get easier, and become more beneficial if you practice it regularly.

Adapted from an exercise by Mel Wraight, University of Nottingham, Counselling Service.
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**Slow Deep Breathing Exercise**

Many of us over-breathe, with rapid shallow breathes getting too much oxygen, too efficiently into our lungs. This can make us more vulnerable to stress and anxiety. When we encounter a stressful situation, unconsciously our rate of breathing increases even more, getting even more oxygen into our bodies. These raised levels of oxygen trigger many of the unpleasant feelings associated with anxiety and panic, including a mistaken sense of being short of breath. So it may sound counter-intuitive, but when we feel anxious and maybe short of breath, what we really need to do is to breathe less efficiently with slower deeper more relaxed breaths. It’s not easy, but we can change the way we breathe with practice and this can make a real difference at times when we are feeling stressed or anxious.

Try the following, taking each point in turn:

- Lie down or sit in a comfortable chair, maintaining good posture. Your body should be as relaxed as possible. Close your eyes.
- Breathing as you would normally. Place one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest. Notice which hand is moving more.
- Consciously try to breathe so that the hand on your abdomen is registering the greatest movement, pushing out your abdomen with each breathe. In doing so you are now utilizing your diaphragm in breathing and taking breaths deeper into the lower part of your lungs.
- Without changing your natural rate of breathing, time your inward and outward breaths by counting. In 1, 2, 3…. Out 1, 2, 3… Do this a few times allowing your breathing to find its natural rhythm. It may be that you want to hold your inward breath for a short count before exhaling.
- Now whatever counts you came to for your inward and outward breaths, continue counting, but try and consciously slow your rate of breathing by increasing by one the count on each breath. It’s usually easier to do this on the outward breath.
- Continue to breathe in this way for a few minutes. Inhaling deeply and slowly into your abdomen, exhaling slowly through your mouth.

Practice this exercise once or twice a day. Start out practicing it when you’re feeling more relaxed and calm. As you become more practiced, try using it in situations where you are feeling more stressed.

**Relaxation Podcasts**

There a lot of different relaxation techniques available online. Have a go at a few of them to find one that you find most helpful. There are several on each of these sites:

- [http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/self-helpresources/podcasts.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/self-helpresources/podcasts.aspx)
- [http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts/](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts/)
- [https://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html](https://www.dartmouth.edu/~healthed/relax/downloads.html)

**Mindfulness**

In our day-to-day lives we often function on automatic pilot, not taking notice of what we are doing or experiencing. Our thoughts are often so focused on past, or possible future events, that we can lose any sense of living in the present moment. To be mindful, is to cultivate a warm, and accepting, moment-to-moment awareness of ourselves and the world around us.

If you want to try mindfulness, there’s an app that can show you more and guide you through some daily exercises. To find it search “headspace” or take a look at the website [https://www.headspace.com/](https://www.headspace.com/) The first ten days are free of charge.