

Relaxation Exercises

Muscular relaxation exercises and deep breathing are two common techniques to help people to relax and combat symptoms of anxiety. They may also help to ease symptoms of depression.

Why do relaxation exercises?

Some people relax with sport, exercise, listening to music, watching TV, reading a book, etc. However, some people find it helpful to follow specific relaxation exercises. This leaflet gives a summary of two commonly used routines - muscular relaxing exercises, and deep breathing exercises. These two techniques are particularly useful to combat the two common physical symptoms of anxiety: muscular tension and over-breathing. There is some evidence that they may also help to ease symptoms of depression.

Like anything else, you need to practise these at first. However, hopefully, you can then use them in everyday life whenever you feel tense or anxious.

Muscular relaxation

Planned times for regular positive relaxation

Find a quiet warm place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you do not feel pressured to do anything else. Lie down on your back, or sit in a well supported chair if you are not able to lie down. Try to get comfortable and close your eyes. Perhaps lie on a firm bed of some cushions. The routine then is to work on each of your muscle groups. With each group of muscles, firstly tense the muscles as much as you can, then relax them fully. Breathe in when you tense the muscles, and breathe out when you relax.

To start with, concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. Breathe slowly and calmly. Each time you breathe out say words to yourself such as "peace" or "relax". Then start the muscle exercises, working around the different muscle groups in your body.

- Hands - clench one hand tightly for a few seconds as you breathe in. You should feel your forearm muscles tense. Then relax as you breathe out. Repeat with the other hand.
- Arms - bend an elbow and tense all the muscles in the arm for a few seconds as you breathe in. Then relax as you breathe out. Repeat the same with the other arm.
- Neck - press your head back as hard as is comfortable and roll it slowly from side to side. Then relax.
- Face - try to frown and lower your eyebrows as hard as you can for a few seconds, then relax. Then raise your eyebrows (as if you were startled) as hard as you can, then relax. Then clench your jaw for a few seconds, then relax.
- Chest - take a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds, then relax and go back to normal breathing.
- Stomach - tense the stomach muscles as tight as possible, then relax.
- Buttocks - squeeze the buttocks together as much as possible, then relax.
- Legs - with your legs flat on the floor, bend your feet and toes towards your face as hard as you can, then relax. Then bend them away from your face for a few seconds, then relax.

Then repeat the whole routine 3-4 times. Each time you relax a group of muscles, note the difference of how they feel when relaxed compared to when they are tense. Some people find it eases their general level of 'tension' if they get into a daily routine of doing these exercises.

Everyday life

Obviously, you cannot do all the above when 'out and about'. However, the principle of full tension followed by relaxation of a group of muscles can help to ease anxiety in everyday situations. Therefore, in situations when you feel tension or anxiety rising:

- Try twisting your neck around each way as far as it is comfortable, and then relax, or
- Try fully tensing your shoulder and back muscles for several seconds, and then relax.

Deep breathing exercises

Many people have a tendency to breathe faster than normal when they are anxious. Sometimes this can make you feel a little dizzy, which makes you more anxious and you breathe even faster, which can make you more anxious, etc. If you practise 'deep breathing' when you are relaxed, you should be able to do this when you feel tense or anxious to help you to relax.

Try the following for 2-3 minutes. Practise this every day until you can do it routinely in any stressful situation:

- Breathe slowly and deeply in through your nose, and out through your mouth in a steady rhythm. Try to make your breath out twice as long as your breath in. To do this you may find it helpful to count slowly "one, two" as you breathe in, and "one, two, three, four" as you breathe out.
- Mainly use your diaphragm (lower chest muscle) to breathe. Your diaphragm is the big muscle under the lungs. It pulls the lungs downwards which expands the airways to allow air to flow in. When we become anxious we tend to forget to use this muscle and often use the muscles at the top of the chest and our shoulders instead. Each breath is more shallow if you use these upper chest muscles. So, you tend to breathe faster, and feel more breathless and anxious, if you use your upper chest muscles rather than your diaphragm.

You can check if you are using your diaphragm by feeling just below your breastbone (sternum) at the top of your abdomen. If you give a little cough, you can feel the diaphragm push out here. If you hold your hand here you should feel it move in and out as you breathe.

- Try to relax your shoulders and upper chest muscles when you breathe. With each breath out, consciously try to relax those muscles until you are mainly using your diaphragm to breathe.

Further reading & references

- [Manzoni GM, Pagnini F, Castelnuovo G, et al](#); Relaxation training for anxiety: a ten-years systematic review with meta-analysis. *BMC Psychiatry*. 2008 Jun 2;8:41.
- [Jorm AF, Morgan AJ, Hetrick SE](#); Relaxation for depression. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2008 Oct 8;(4):CD007142.
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