

How to stay calm and relaxed



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This booklet is intended as a back up for the relaxation workshops run by the Counselling Service in the University. It is also a good source of information for anyone interested in learning about relaxation. There is practical advice about the subject as well as instructions for some of the relaxation techniques that are taught in the workshops.

It is meant to be a guide, to give you some ideas of how to go about learning to relax. If you are particularly interested in any of the techniques suggested, then it is best to seek out more detailed information. This guide is not meant to replace professional help or guidance.

HOW TO STAY CALM AND RELAXED

If wanting to become more relaxed is your aim, it helps to cultivate an awareness of when you experience stress. Noticing how tense or relaxed you feel in certain situations will help you spot the signs of stress. You can then make a deliberate effort to relax in those situations.

Examples to watch out for are: when you are waiting for an appointment or to be served in a restaurant; if rushing from one place to another; when work dominates your free time; when your social life with family and friends is suffering; if you are highly ambitious; driving aggressively; eating quickly; suppressing your feelings and then betraying them through angry outbursts, criticism or irritability or when you cannot sit still comfortably without being occupied.

Warning signs

By learning to recognise the signs of stress, you can take steps to prevent it building up and getting out of control. Stress has a habit of creeping up on us. Even when the signals are there we can ignore them, hoping they will go away. It is important to spot the warning signs of stress and take steps to relieve it before it becomes a serious problem. Some of the most common signs are: tiredness and irritability; headaches; waking up at night with problems going round and round; lack of concentration; increase in addictions to drugs or TV etc; depression and negativity; muscle tension and fatigue; changes in weight; angry outbursts and nervous habits.

Create a good life-work balance

Because of the increase of sophisticated technology and the current work culture, it is harder to get a good life –work balance. When our lives are out of balance, we end up suffering stress which has a negative impact on our mental and physical health. When the balance is right, with space for life, relationships, interests, fun as well as work, you protect yourself against stress and its affects. A balanced life promotes health, happiness and well being. So, assess your life on a regular basis and take steps to create balance.

Listen to your body

The body lets us know through physical sensations and emotions what is right or wrong with us. We are often so concentrated in our minds that we lose touch with our bodies. Taking time to pay attention to the signals that our bodies give us will help us spot the signs of tension and stress. Examples are intuitions, hunches, gut feelings as well as more obvious signs likes aches and pains.

Switch off from work

Many people leave work physically but not in their minds. If you can establish rituals for switching off from work and relaxing, then you can become more creative and effective in your problem solving. One way to do this is to create a zone where you mentally clock off from work. This could be done on your way home, for example, as you practice mindfulness or breathing meditation or listen to music. If you have spent most of the day sitting, then some exercise may help, as long as you stay present in what you are doing so that mind and body are working together to relax and revitalise you. If you take the bus

to and from work, try getting off a few stops earlier to practice mindful walking or do a breathing relaxation on the bus. If you drive, you could try breathing from the abdomen and focusing on the out-breath while keeping focused on driving.

EXERCISE - Mindful walking

Instructions

Focus on one thing at a time to calm and quiet the mind. This could be looking and naming what you are seeing around you as you walk without going into a story about anything, just observing. Or you could pay attention to sounds, again just noticing the sounds around you. Alternatively, focusing on the body is particularly helpful if you want to be more grounded. Start with the feet and work up to the head consciously relaxing the different parts of your body as you walk. Begin by noticing the movement of your legs and feet, becoming aware of how your balance shifts as you put one foot in front of the other. Notice the way your feet hit the ground, first the heel and then the toe. What does the ground feel like? Is it hard or soft?

Make relaxation a habit

The key to successful relaxation is to make it something that you fit into your life on a daily basis. One session once a week is not going to produce great results! Everyone is different. If you find ways of relaxing that are enjoyable for you, then you will want to do it more and the benefits will be obvious. Try out different techniques at different times and find out what suits you best. Find a way of reminding yourself of what you want to do and when by writing it in your diary or sticking a notice on the wall. It is easy to get inspired and then forget the next day!

BODY

EXERCISE: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing the different muscles of the body in an orderly sequence. It is important when tensing your muscles not to strain or cause pain but to use only a moderate amount of tension. Your aim is to learn to identify and contrast the feelings of tension and relaxation, so that you can reduce tension later. After the relaxation you will feel more relaxed and you will benefit from this restful feeling for some time afterwards.

Instructions

This exercise is best done lying down. Make sure you are not going to be disturbed. Listening to music can be helpful. Use music that is slower than your heart rate (under seventy-two beats per minute). This encourages the pulse to slow down and match the beat of the music.

Start with your feet and work through the body finishing with the head.

Tensing phase: feet

Tense the muscles in your feet by curling the toes either downwards or upwards, and while you are doing this, notice where the tension occurs and how it feels. Hold the tension for **5** seconds.

Relaxing phase: feet

Now, let that physical tension go and as you do, feel yourself starting to relax in those muscles and more generally. Notice the tension slipping away and the changes in the sensations which you experience. Let all of the tension go. Actively let the tension flow out of your muscles, and notice how they relax, loosen, become slack and unwind. Really focus on those sensations of relaxation in your feet. Your whole body is benefiting from the relaxed sensations. Enjoy these sensations for a few seconds now.....Let any remaining tension go from your feet. You will notice that your feet might be feeling warm. Focus on these pleasant feelings. Allow yourself to focus on the feelings and let other thoughts drift away. When distracting thoughts come to mind, let them go again by bringing your attention back to the feelings in your feet.

Repeat tensing and relaxing phases for:

Legs - tense the muscles in your legs by pushing them against the floor.

Stomach – tense the muscles in your stomach by pulling them in.

Arms - tense the muscles in your arms by raising them off the floor just a bit and locking the elbows, then gently lowering them back onto the floor.

Hands - tense the muscles in your hands by making tight fists.

Chest - tense the muscles in your chest by lifting your shoulders and pushing your chest muscles against the floor.

Neck - tense the muscles in your neck by raising your head off the floor for just a bit, then gently lowering it back onto the floor.

Head - tense the muscles in your head by gently rolling it from side to side.

Face - tense the muscles in your face by screwing up your face and pressing your tongue on the roof of your mouth.

GOOD POSTURE

Good posture promotes health and well-being. By standing and sitting up straight you open up your lungs, allowing yourself to breathe more freely and deeply. This helps relieve stress and increases energy levels. Good posture supports your head and neck properly, making you feel lighter, more relaxed and confident. Pain in the neck, shoulders and back can be the result of poor posture. An inactive lifestyle and long hours sitting over keyboards, slumped in car seats and on sofas causes tension, stiffness, and stress to the spine. Slouching also leads to depleted energy levels and a negative outlook on life.

To counteract this, develop an inner awareness of how you hold yourself, how you sit, stand and move. We can learn to sit and stand correctly by scanning our body mentally.

EXERCISE - *The body check: standing*

When you are confronted with a stressful situation, either mentally, emotionally or physically threatening, your body responds in the same way, preparing you for fight or flight. Muscles tense in readiness to run; hands, jaws and teeth are clenched in readiness for a fight.

This primitive reflex from the past does not help us deal with the typical stresses we face today. Pressures of work and emotional pain are effectively stored in our bodies, as tight

muscles. Excessive tension is not only felt as aches and pains, but is reflected in posture and expression too.

The body check is a rapid way to tune into your body, become aware of and release tension, correct poor posture and relax. You can do it anywhere – standing in line or waiting for something or someone. It will provide instant stress relief, will keep you in touch with your body, increase energy and make you feel more positive. You will also appear more relaxed and confident to others.

Instructions

1. Start by standing wherever you happen to be and bring your awareness to your feet. Have your feet roughly hip distance apart. Make sure your weight is evenly distributed over the soles of both feet by rocking back and forth a few times.
2. Breathing in deeply, tuck in your pelvis. Breathing out fully relax your legs.
3. Breathing in deeply, allow your arms to rest at your sides and your hands to hang loosely.
4. Breathing out fully, bring your shoulders back and down, gently stretching and elongating your spine and the back of your neck. Hold your chin level and tuck in your pelvis again so that the back is straighter.
5. Breathing slowly and evenly, adjust your posture. Continue to lengthen upwards. Your weight should now be centred over your pelvis, with your head comfortably balanced above your neck so that head, neck, spine, pelvis, legs and feet are in a straight, but relaxed, rather than rigid, line.
6. Relax your face. Allow your lips to part slightly and rest your tongue loosely in your mouth. Soften your jaw and your throat. Soften your gaze. Smile inwardly. Feel a smile moving down your whole body from the top of your head to the tips of your toes.
7. Mentally scan your body again, noting any areas of tension. If you find tension, breathe into it, allowing the tension to dissolve. Breathe in energy, calmness and vitality, breathe out tension.

DE-STRESS AT YOUR DESK

Mental and physical tension can be caused by long hours spent hunched over a desk, bending over paperwork or at a computer combined with pressures of work. When you are busy and preoccupied with work it is easy to miss the signs of tension building up. To avoid this happening, take regular short breaks to check your posture and break up long periods of inactivity with movement to prevent muscles stiffening and joints seizing up. Doing a few stretching exercises whilst sitting or standing can relieve tense muscles.

Get into the habit of using the body check several times a day. It is a quick way to tune into the body, correct poor posture, and scan for physical tension and relax.

EXERCISE - *The body check: sitting*

Sitting well has a big impact on your overall well-being. A good sitting posture reduces stiffness, aches and pains and, even more important, keeps your chest open so you breathe more efficiently. Having an open upright posture also promotes a positive mood.

The body check can be done almost anywhere - at your desk or when you are sitting waiting.

Instructions

1. Sit with your feet flat and firmly on the floor (place books beneath them if necessary), hip width apart, knees directly above them and slightly lower than your hips. Your hands can rest in your lap or hang loosely by your sides. You may close your eyes to help you focus inwards if you wish.
2. Breathe in deeply. Follow the breath as the abdomen swells, your side ribs expand and the top of your chest lifts. Keeping your muscles relaxed, straighten your back, lengthening your spine and extending the back of your neck. Keep your chin tucked in.
3. Now breathing out, lower your shoulders and draw them gently back, pressing your shoulder blades into your back.
4. While you take one or two more deep breaths, keep stretching and elongating your spine upwards with each inhalation, keeping your shoulders down and back, tucking your chin in and keeping the chest relaxed. Imagine a golden thread in the centre of your spine extending from the base vertically upwards through the crown of your head, gently drawing you up. Your posture is correct when the weight of your upper body is centred over your sitting bones. Stay in this posture for a few moments, breathing naturally, consciously relaxing your whole body, being sure to soften and relax your face, jaw and tongue.

For a longer relaxation, go through the body focusing your attention on each body part, mentally giving it the message with auto suggestion to relax and let go.

Look after your eyes

Eyes are working most of the time without a break. Aching, strained or dry eyes can often be a symptom of stress. Reading for long periods, working at a screen, watching TV, driving and fatigue can all contribute to eye strain. Air conditioning, pollution, or strip lighting can also aggravate tired eyes.

If your job involves staring at a screen for more than three hours a day, you may experience some form of eye strain or discomfort. To relieve eyestrain:

- Blink often to moisten dry eyes
- Take frequent breaks from the computer
- Do eye exercises daily
- Rest and relax your eyes by palming

Just like other muscles, the eyes need regular exercise. These exercises will strengthen the eye muscles, relieving and helping to prevent eyestrain.

EXERCISES- for the eyes

Near-far focusing

Instructions

1. Sit with your feet flat and firmly on the floor, your back straight, your chest lifted and your shoulders rolling back. Rest your hands in your lap or allow them to hang loosely by your sides, and breathe normally throughout the exercise.
2. Hold your forefinger up in front of your nose, about a foot away from you.
3. Focus on your finger first, then on the wall or on any object beyond (in the middle or far distance). Alternate your gaze to and fro, focusing as clearly as you can, several times.

Clock watching

Instructions

1. Imagine a large clock (the old-fashioned kind with numbers and hands) in front of you a few feet away from your face. Without moving your head, start by looking up at twelve o'clock then down to six o'clock, up to one o'clock then diagonally down to seven o'clock, up to two o'clock then across to eight o'clock, and so on round the clock.
2. Repeat each pair of opposites several times before going on to the next pair. Repeat in the opposite direction.
3. Now move your eyes clockwise around the clock, beginning at 12.00, and coming full circle back again. Make slow circles for two or three rounds, then repeat, getting faster for up to ten rounds. Repeat the same process in an anti-clockwise direction.
4. Palming (see below)

Palming

Palming can be done on its own for a minute or two any time to refresh tired eyes, for a longer time to reduce headache or used in conjunction with the eye exercises. You can do it sitting or lying down.

Instructions

1. This can be done sitting or lying down. It is important that your elbows are supported at a height that allows you to cup your hands over your eyes while keeping your back straight. So use a chair in front of a desk or you can sit on the floor with your back supported by a wall, resting your elbows on your knees. Alternatively, you can lie down with knees raised and feet flat on the floor.
2. Rub your hands together briskly, creating enough friction to warm the palms. Place your cupped hands gently over your closed eyes without touching them, so the outer edges of your palms and fingers make firm contact with your face and all light is excluded.
3. Hold your hands in place for up to ten minutes or longer, letting the heat and dark soothe and relax your eyes. Become aware of your breathing. Feel your eyes becoming restored and energised as you breathe in, feel them relaxing as you breathe out.

EXERCISE - Breathing

Breathing exercises are good to do at your desk, whilst waiting for an appointment, in a queue or on a bus etc. Slow breathing can be used as an instant tranquilizer and focusing on the breath helps interrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts and feelings that can lead to tension. You can do this for a few moments or for longer.

Without being aware of it most adults breathe inefficiently using only the upper part of the chest. Generally when we are calm and relaxed we breathe deeply, in a slow and rhythmic fashion. When anxious and stressed we breathe faster, with shallow, irregular breaths sometimes punctuated by gasps as our bodies strive to increase the supply of oxygen. If this pattern of breathing continues unchecked it becomes a habit, which in turn makes us more nervous and agitated, and a vicious circle is established. Prolonged or extreme stress can result in over breathing or hyperventilation, which can cause dizziness and fainting, and trigger panic attacks.

Simply by becoming aware of your breathing you can begin to reverse bad habits and train yourself to breathe correctly. Using breathing techniques will rapidly relieve stress and will also still your mind in preparation for practicing meditation or guided imagery.

When doing breathing exercises it is a good idea to breathe in through your nose and out through your nose or mouth (whichever is most comfortable). We focus on the out breath, as prolonging the out-breath reduces tension through temporarily raising your blood carbon dioxide level.

Instructions

You can do this standing, sitting or lying down.

1. Bring your awareness into the present moment.
2. Then breathe in through the nose, pausing only briefly, let the air out quite slowly. This inhale is a moderate to deep in-breath. If you are tense then try breathing from the chest area. As you become more relaxed you will find that you can breathe into the abdomen to get a deeper breath.
3. Allow the breath to enter and leave the body in an encouraging way rather than forcing it. The out-breath is the key to the method. Be sure to prolong – to *lengthen* your exhale.
4. As you slowly breathe out, let go! Relax your muscles, especially your shoulders. Relax the different parts of the body, letting go of tension every time you breathe out. You can start at the head and work down to the feet or the other way round.
5. If you need to, direct your attention outside yourself to what is happening. Silently pay attention to what you can see and hear without listing or naming things. Carry on with the breathing exercise when appropriate.
6. It is important to direct your awareness inward on the breath and the relaxation. If your mind wanders off, then gently bring it back to the breath.

MOVEMENT AND EXERCISE

Regular exercise helps you sleep better, boosts your energy and raises self-esteem. Taking regular exercise promotes physical and mental fitness and de-stresses the body. Research recommends that we should be doing twenty to thirty minutes of moderate

physical activity most days. This could be divided into smaller chunks, for example, two or three ten minute sessions. Any activity counts so incorporating simple exercise into your daily routine can be just as beneficial as going to the gym.

Ideally, you should combine aerobic activity-exercise (such as running and fast walking) that gets the heart pumping - with stretching exercises to maintain and increase flexibility, and weight-bearing activities, such as walking , jogging or dancing, in order to tone and strengthen the muscles. Find something you enjoy doing so that exercise becomes an activity that is pleasurable. It is also important to find something that engages your mind as well as your body so that you are present and in tune with what you are doing.

Walking is one of the best all-round forms of exercise and the easiest to fit into a busy schedule. If you travel to work by bus, you can try getting off a few stops before the office or home and have a brisk ten-minute walk.

GET THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF SLEEP

Sleep deprivation can cause ill-health, premature ageing, depression, stress and burn-out. Long nights of uninterrupted, restorative sleep are now acknowledged as a way to stay healthy, creative and dynamic. Although individual needs vary, current thinking says that it is best to aim for eight hours of sound sleep a night. If you wake up earlier feeling rested on a regular basis, then your sleep requirement is less. If you are unwell or have interrupted sleep, or you still feel tired after eight hours' quality sleep, you may need more. Staying in bed for a long time at the week-end to make up for lost sleep can throw your body clock out of sync with its workaday needs. On the days that you sleep in you are likely to feel tired and lethargic. So, getting into a regular sleep routine – going to bed and getting up at regular times, with enough sleep in between – is the best way to feel relaxed and refreshed.

Tips for a good night's sleep

- Create a restful environment in your bedroom. Make it a work-free, tension free zone by keeping out television, laptops etc. Keep it as quiet and dark as possible, and at a comfortable temperature: 16-18°C is ideal.
- Unless you are ill or exhausted, avoid afternoon and evening naps. Take a power nap of 10-30 minutes instead to improve cognitive functioning.
- Take regular exercise, but not too close to bedtime.
- Ensure you have a comfortable, supportive mattress and a comfortable pillow (too many pillows, or pillows that are too thin, strain the neck and cause headaches). Your head has the right support when the spinal section in the upper back is level with that of your neck.
- Have your main meal at least 2-3 hours before your regular bedtime. Eat tryptophan rich foods for a snack before bed (sources - dairy, oats, corn, bananas, turkey, chicken, tuna, peanut butter or lettuce).
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol at least 3 hours before bed as these can stimulate brain activity and raise blood pressure. Take milky drinks or herbal teas instead.

- Try not to rely on sleeping pills as these interfere with the deeper stages of sleep. Instead, use alternative remedies to aid sleep such as herbal medicine or aromatherapy.
- Relax and unwind before going to bed with a relaxing book, music, meditation or using one or more unwinding techniques and activities. Prepare your body for sleep by developing a bedtime ritual, doing the same things each night before bed.
- Avoid looking at the clock – clock watching creates anxiety.
- If you are not asleep within 20-30 minutes or wake up in the night and cannot get back to sleep, get up and do something relaxing, boring or repetitive to help you feel sleepy. Then go back to bed again.
- If worries and problems are keeping you awake, write them down (when they are on paper you can let them go easier) or use a problem solving technique.

MIND AND SPIRIT

Relentlessly turning things over in your mind, unable to switch off, is a classic characteristic of stress. Looking after your body and taking regular physical exercise helps keep stress levels under control, but you also need to make time for mental retreat.

FOCUSED ACTIVITY

Engage yourself in an activity or hobby that is completely absorbing. Being focused on something pleasurable is very satisfying and relaxing. It takes our mind off problems and worries and feeds the soul.

DE-CLUTTER

The therapeutic benefits of a good clear out or spring clean are not new. Living in disorder and mess can have a negative affect on the spirit. Clearing up your clutter can be enormously satisfying, liberating, relaxing and truly cathartic. As you throw out the physical junk, the mental and emotional junk follows.

MEDITATION

A traditional way to calm the mind is through the ancient practice of meditation. Meditation improves both mental and physical health and it is a proven antidote to stress. When the mind is at rest, your instinctive powers of self-healing come into play, and the stress response is reversed. Many forms of meditation involve focusing on the breath. Awareness and regulation of the breathing process is an effective means of achieving mental and physical health and relaxation.

Regular meditation may promote a significant decrease in heart rate, lowering of blood pressure, a calming of the nervous system and an improvement in all kinds of stress-related disorders such as depression, headaches and insomnia.

Meditation is easy to learn. All you need is ten minutes in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed, once or twice a day. For lasting results you need to practice on a regular

basis. Picking a specific time each day and building it into your routine is the easiest way to get started.

Posture

It is important to be in a relaxed and stable posture during meditation with your spine straight but relaxed. If sitting is not comfortable, you can lie down. Getting your position right helps to steady your breathing and quiet your mind.

Breathing

During meditation your breathing should be natural, not forced or controlled. Breathe through your nose, not your mouth, and allow your breathing to become steadier of its own accord as your mind becomes still.

Meditation focus

Most forms of meditation involve focusing attention on a particular object, image or sound. Examples are silently repeating a mantra, prayer or any set of words; gazing at a candle; walking whilst being aware of what is going on inside or outside you; just sitting and being in the moment or simply observing your breath as it comes in and goes out.

Attitude

When you begin learning to meditate you may become aware that you have lots of thoughts and feelings that arise. It is best not to try and get rid of them but simply just to notice them without comment and gently bring your attention back to the focus of your meditation.

EXERCISE: *Breathing meditation*

Through this meditation we work on the development of awareness by cultivating the faculty of mindfulness. By resting our mind on a single object, we learn to take control of our mind rather than allow it to be distracted and restless. In this way we experience a calm, recollected state in which there is also vitality and clarity.

Instructions

Sit on a chair with a firm seat and have your back straight but relaxed. Place your feet flat on the floor, hip width apart with your knees directly above them and your hands in your lap.

We simply attend to the sensations of our normal breathing. The gentle rhythm of our breath calms us down. Staying aware of the subtlety of the breath gradually focuses the mind.

The meditation is in **four stages**.

The first stage counting after each breath. Breathing in, breathing out and saying in the mind 1. In, out and saying 2 and so on until we get to 10, in, out 10 and then back to 1.

In the second stage counting before each breath. So we say to ourselves 1 then in, out, 2 breathing in, breathing out and so on up to 10, in, out 10 and then back to 1.

In the third stage no longer using the counting, just attending silently to the breath.

And in the final stage settling our awareness on the point where the air can first be felt on its way in, in the nostrils perhaps or further back or on the upper lip.

There is no such thing as a bad meditation. Just accept what arises. You may have a busy mind. If and when you notice that your mind has wandered off, just bring it back to the meditation without judgment.

GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery (or creative visualization) is the technique of using our imagination to create a desired outcome or state. This is not something that is strictly visual but uses all of the senses: sight, sound, smells, taste and feeling to create a sensory image. This is the language of the body and the images that we create can almost be as real as actual events.

We use our imagination everyday without thinking about it. If we have a negative view about life, we use our imagination automatically and unconsciously to imagine that things are not going to go well.

Guided imagery is about using our imagination in a more conscious way to deliberately create what we want in our lives by creating a clear image, idea, or feeling of something we wish to manifest. The more you focus on the idea, feeling or picture, giving it positive energy, the more it becomes a reality.

In order for guided imagery to be effective, you need to set a goal, create a clear idea or picture, believe it can happen, focus on it often, give it positive energy and be relaxed.

You can use imagery in different ways: to change your mood; for health and well-being; to see yourself how you want to be as if it has already happened; or for materialistic objects, money or relationships.

EXERCISE – *Creating Your Sanctuary*

It is important to relax deeply because when your body and mind are deeply relaxed, your brain wave pattern actually changes and becomes slower. Being in this state means that you can make more effective changes in your life.

Put on relaxing music if it helps. Close your eyes. Sit comfortably and relax your body completely. Start from your head and moving down to your toes, think of relaxing each muscle in your body in turn, letting all tension flow out of your body. Breathe deeply and slowly, from your abdomen.

It is very helpful to create a sanctuary within yourself where you can go anytime you want to. Make it a relaxing place that is tranquil and safe.

Imagine yourself in some beautiful natural environment. It can be anyplace that appeals to you...natural, created, somewhere that is familiar or make believe. Wherever it is, it should feel comfortable, pleasant, and peaceful to you. Explore your environment, noticing the visual details, the sounds and smells, any particular feelings or impressions you get about it.

Do anything you would like to do to make the place more appealing and comfortable. You might want to build some type of house or shelter there, perhaps just surround the whole area with a golden light of protection and safety, create and arrange things there for your convenience and enjoyment, or do a ritual to establish it as your special place.

This is your own personal inner sanctuary, to which you can return anytime just by closing your eyes and desiring to be there. It can also a place of special power for you, and you may wish to go there every time you do guided imagery.

When you have finished, slowly open your eyes and adjust to your surroundings.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES TO HELP EXAM PERFORMANCE

Almost everyone feels nervous before an exam. In fact, a certain amount of nervous tension probably helps us perform to the best of our ability, producing a rush of adrenaline that helps us to feel alert and focused. But too much anxiety can BLOCK thoughts, create a negative frame of mind, and lead to panic and potentially poor exam performance. This is why it is important to learn to relax.

There are a number of things you can do to help manage exam anxiety and turn uncomfortable, panicky thoughts into more creative tension. Relaxation can be learned and improves with practice. Learning how to relax is invaluable in the lead-up to exams, and on the day itself.

BEFORE THE EXAM

- It's hard to panic if you are feeling relaxed.
- Try to establish a pattern of revision that gives you time to relax, especially last thing at night.
- Find a way of relaxing that suits you – a long bath, breathing exercises, gentle stretching exercises, listening to music, guided imagery, a relaxation CD (available from the Counselling Service).

Breathing Exercise

Slow breathing can be used as an instant tranquilizer and focusing on the breath helps interrupt the cycle of anxious thoughts and feelings that can lead to tension. You can do this for a few moments or for longer.

We focus on the out breath, as prolonging the out-breath reduces tension through temporarily raising your blood carbon dioxide level.

Instructions

You can do this standing, sitting or lying down.

7. Bring your awareness into the present moment.
8. Then breathe in through the nose, pausing only briefly, let the air out quite slowly. This inhale is a moderate to deep in-breath. If you are tense then try breathing from the chest area. As you become more relaxed you will find that you can breathe into the abdomen to get a deeper breath.
9. Allow the breath to enter and leave the body in an encouraging way rather than forcing it. The out-breath is the key to the method. Be sure to prolong – to *lengthen* your exhale.
10. As you slowly breathe out, let go! Relax your muscles, especially your shoulders. Relax the different parts of the body, letting go of tension every time you breathe out. You can start at the head and work down to the feet or the other way round.
11. If you need to, direct your attention outside yourself to what is happening. Silently pay attention to what you can see and hear without listing or naming things. Carry on with the breathing exercise when appropriate.
12. It is important to direct your awareness inward on the breath and the relaxation. If your mind wanders off, then gently bring it back to the breath.

Guided Imagery Exercise

Use the Guided imagery technique to put yourself in a positive frame of mind and imagine how you would like things to go. After arriving in your sanctuary (exercise in previous section) imagine yourself turning up for the exam feeling confident and relaxed and wearing something that makes you feel confident. Picture this in as much detail as possible. Use all your senses, especially those that are strong for you. See, hear and feel yourself doing well, answering the questions and finishing on time. When this positive feeling is strongest, create a trigger gesture and a trigger word or phrase that represents your positive image. Next, imagine yourself feeling really pleased with yourself after the exam. Again, see, hear and feel what you will do.

When you have finished, slowly open your eyes and adjust to your surroundings.

IN THE EXAM

Here are some ideas to help contradict the 'I can't answer anything' feeling and other worrying thoughts about exams. When you get into the exam room and sit down, try the following exercises to help settle your nerves:

Focusing exercise

- Take a moderately deep breath in and a long breath out.
- Breathe in again and straighten your back – as if someone were pulling a lever between your shoulder blades.
- Look straight ahead at something inanimate (the wall, a picture, the clock...) and focus your mind on the positive thought 'I CAN DO THIS EXAM' as you breathe out.

- Take another deep breath in and a long breath out. Then breathe normally.
- If you begin to feel panicky again, repeat the focusing exercise. It is important to keep yourself focused and positive so that you can read clearly.

Stop your negative thoughts

- Do this by mentally shouting STOP and picturing a red stop sign or a red flag. Once you have stopped the thoughts, you can practice a relaxation technique such as the breathing relaxation or the one below.

Use a trigger word or phrase and from your guided imagery

- Use your trigger gesture to access the relaxed positive state from the guided imagery exercise.
- Repeat your trigger word or phrase (like ‘calm’ or ‘I am relaxed and focused’) under your breath or in your head, several times to promote confidence.
- Remember to breathe out slowly as you do this.

It is important to find the relaxation techniques that work for you and practice them before the exam so that when you need them, they can be practiced effortlessly and easily.

Tips for controlling nerves before, during and after a presentation

- Think about why you are doing the presentation
- What are your aims?
- What’s in it for you/for others?
- Visualise the benefits/rewards for doing a good job
- **Notes / Overheads / Handouts**
- Try different ways and find out what works for you.
 - Bullet points
 - Cue cards
 - Rehearse it out loud in front of a mirror / friends
- **Plan**
 - How are you going to get there / be on time
 - Timing of presentation – not too long or short
 - What do you need to have with you
 - Check out the equipment available
 - Have a glass of water that is 1/3 full to prevent spilling
- **Controlling nerves**
 - If you get nervous, visualise a STOP sign to stop the cycle of negative thoughts.
 - Think positively, challenging any negative thoughts such as “People will think I am stupid”, “I can’t do this” and replace them with “I can do this”.
 - Have a mantra that you can say to yourself to instil confidence.

- Remember to breathe, slowing down the out breath
 - If you are blushing or your speech is wobbly, ignore it.
 - Focus on the content of your talk
 - Slow your speech down as this helps you feel more in control
- **Lighthouse technique**
 - Look at a person who is smiling and friendly
 - Then sweep the audience one way and then the other
 - Keep coming back to the person who is receptive
 - Don't look long at anyone who is bored/hostile
- **Energy levels**
 - Be yourself and let that be good enough
 - Nerves can dull your senses or speed you up.
 - Up the ante if you or the audience is slumping by moving about or changing the tone of your voice to emphasise points
 - Move the focus around (from yourself to a handout or PowerPoint slide)
- **Afterwards**
 - Congratulate yourself for getting through it
 - Focus on what you did well
 - This will help your confidence level for the next time

I hope this information has been helpful and that you find a way of relaxing that is enjoyable and creates a positive change in your life. Once again, I will say that the most important thing is to make change, however small, into a habit. Small changes can have remarkable results. Doing something positive for just a few moments can begin to improve your health and well-being. You can then build on this towards a happier mind, body and spirit.

Further information

It is best to choose books etc that appeal to you personally. A few ideas are listed below.

Books

- Books on Mindfulness by Jon Kabat- Zinn
- *Office Yoga* by Julie Friedeberger
- *Creative Visualisation* by Shakti Gawain
- *Seven days to a Perfect Night's Sleep* (Debra Gordon, St Martin's Paperbacks)
- *Instant Calm, Instant Confidence, Control Stress, I Can Make You Sleep* (books with Hypnosis CDs) by Paul McKenna

CDs

- *Peaceful Moments Volume 1* by Uncommon Knowledge (www.unk.com)
- *Mindfulness Meditations* North Wales Centre for Mindfulness (www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness)

- *Yoga for Stress Relief* DVD for anyone who already knows how to do Yoga (BodyWisdomMedia.com)
- *Meditainment Total Relaxation* (www.meditainment.com)
- www.innerchange.co.uk
- Relaxing music played during workshops:
 - Inner Peace - www.music-mosaic.com
 - Spa Gold Aramara - www.paradisemusic.co.uk
 - Shamanic Dream – www.openskymusic.com or Amazon

Web

- www.britishsleepfoundation.org.uk
- www.getsomeheadspace.com for free meditations

Breathing Relaxation Podcast and Guided Imagery Podcast

- www.shef.ac.uk/counselling/staff