

Relaxation

- ◆ When we are tense the body cannot repair itself, the body makes less natural painkillers and we tire more quickly
- ◆ Relaxation skills can be learnt and with practice can be used anywhere
- ◆ There are practical, physical and thinking ways to achieve relaxation

Just Relax!

We probably all know that relaxation could help when we are stressed, in pain, and life looks bleak, but it seems that the more we need to relax the harder we find it to do.

The key to this dilemma is to realise relaxation is a skill to be learnt, and like most skills needs to be maintained by practice.

There are four common approaches to relaxation:

1. Distraction – do something or think about something different from the thing making you tense

Your back is hurting, so instead of talking about it, when you meet someone, talk about his or her interests. Alternatively, you immerse yourself in football on TV, difficult embroidery, a computer game, or how those pigeons are landing on the roof ... your mind is so tuned in to something else it hasn't any spare resources to be tense about your back.

2. Physical Relaxation - tighten and let go

This is a physical exercise where you tighten parts of your body as tight as you can for seven seconds, feel the tension and let go and feel the contrast. Then you move onto the next part and so on until you've done all but any damaged areas. (Do not tense any areas causing significant pain or which you have recently hurt) If you are still tense you go through it again, once or twice more, always concentrating on that feeling of looseness.

The Exercise

Sit in an upright position, on a dining chair, with some kind of lumbar support.

To help you memorise the moves use phrases, jot them down until you remember them:

- ◆ Ballet toes - stretch legs out, push toes away, tighten thigh muscles. Hold for seven, let go, feel the looseness afterwards.
- ◆ Curly toes - curl toes upwards, try to bend towards knees with leg straight, count seven let go.
- ◆ Tight bottom- tighten buttocks, count seven let go.
- ◆ 6 Pack(!) - hold chest out and tighten tummy muscles like a body builder, count seven let go, feel the looseness.
- ◆ Archer - sit tall and arch back like a bow, push arms straight out like arrows beside trunk, count seven, let go and feel the release.
- ◆ Poser- hold arms out bent and tense above head again like a body builder, count seven, let go.
- ◆ Hide - shrug shoulders up and hide head into neck like a turtle, count seven, let go.
- ◆ Wrinkle - make face tight and wrinkled, lips pulled tight like purse strings, eyes screwed up, clench jaw - (but not enough to break a tooth!), count seven, let go.
- ◆ Ugly face - contort face into ugly shapes, count seven, let go.

Now feel the looseness in your body. Where you still detect tension, repeat part or all of the sequence. Practice this relaxation every day, when you are already fairly relaxed. As you practice, you'll be able to achieve relaxation more easily and deeply just when you need it. If you have been practicing regularly even when you are in company and become aware of tension you can quickly do the "let go" either straight from the tension area or tightening just that part first.

Remember, if you learn the list of key words you can practice anytime ...

3. Breathing Relaxation

This is breathing with the muscles of your diaphragm rather than your chest wall. Try to practice diaphragmatic (tummy) breathing every day.

The Exercise

- ◆ Sitting tall, but not tense in a dining type chair, and become aware of what moves when you breathe.
- ◆ Think of a sleeping baby breathing, its tummy moves up and down.
- ◆ Put your hands on your tummy and think of drawing air into the bottom of your lungs and on into your tummy, noticing your tummy fill rather than your shoulders rise when you take a deep breath.

When you've mastered the art, you can add a sigh to your routine:

- ◆ Take a deep breath, filling tummy and lifting shoulders to fill chest, and then let it out in a gentle long sigh.

Use this for 'emergencies' that suddenly make you tense: that unexpected stabbing pain, that fear that getting better will be a long time coming. As you get a little bit of relaxation from the sigh you will not feel the pain as much and be able to remember that bad backs do get better and feel more in control and less need to be tense to protect yourself from the unsuspected threat, be it physical or worry.

4. Escape Relaxation

This is best practiced after some physical relaxation- eg.: 'physical tighten - let go' or tummy breathing

The Exercise

- ◆ Try to imagine yourself back into a time, place, or event where you felt blissfully happy and relaxed. Maybe on holiday on the beach in 1986, or reclining at the table eating chocolate cake just after mum had taken it out of the oven.
- ◆ Try to completely rebuild all the wonderful things about that experience in your mind – the sights, smells, sounds, and above all the feeling of safety, peace, calm and personal power. You may need to put together lots of different memories and images, even scenes from TV ads to make your place of bliss.
- ◆ Imagine walking down a lovely, tree-lined (or harvest ready fields-lined) road to a door or gate, which you push open onto your place of bliss, and there you turn your mind to each aspect and just enjoy it. After a while, you imagine yourself turning to go, and walk back out the gate or door and down the road back to the here and now.

It's all very well telling me to relax but I can't!

Relaxing when under pressure is a skill, so be kind to yourself. However tense you are, there will be times, or a time in the day when you are more relaxed. That is the time to start practising relaxing -probably with the 'tense let go' routine. Keep a diary or make a commitment to someone who respects you to try to practice every day, and you will learn this hard but invaluable skill.

Then you will be able to call on it right when you need it.

Meanwhile just practicing relaxation will decrease the amount of tension you carry around day to day. Remember anxiety reduces the body's ability to make natural painkillers. "Feel good" chemicals abound when we are relaxed.

Relevant Information

- ◆ BackCare Factsheets – [Alexander Technique, Physical Activity and Exercise](#)
- ◆ BackCare Booklets – Managing Back Pain, Active Back care
- ◆ BackCare Video – Fighting Back