

RELAXATION RESPONSE

Human beings have a natural ability to protect themselves from stress. This is called the 'relaxation response'. There a number of ways to activate this protective mechanism: **progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing and guided imagery** are three such techniques which are the focus of this brochure.

These techniques recommended here aim to rest the mind and body by 'turning off' the world outside of you. Learning them can help to **lessen your tension and anxiety** which in turn can improve your general feeling of wellbeing.

It does take **patience and practice** to develop these skills so that they are effective. In fact, relaxation works cumulatively (in other words, the effect adds up) – the more you practice the easier it is to relax, the better you feel and the easier it is to stay relaxed in stressful situations. If you sometimes find it just too difficult to switch off from the stresses of your day, be patient – sit quietly for a while and don't force the techniques. Don't stop practicing though: a little is better than nothing.

Helpful hints before you start

- ◆ Choose a quiet spot where you won't be disturbed – switch off the TV, radio, telephone.
- ◆ Loosen any tight-fitting clothing, belts, etc., and take off your shoes.
- ◆ Practice 2-3 times weekly and work up to once every day.
- ◆ Remember that it takes time before you feel results.
- ◆ If you don't like these particular techniques, there are many others available on CDs.
- ◆ Don't worry about distracting thoughts – just note them and carry on, focusing on your breathing (imagine a large field or a big hall – leave the gate or door open, and as thoughts pass through, simply allow them out the gate or door on the other side).
- ◆ Don't evaluate yourself while you are doing your exercises as this interferes with relaxation.

Three techniques to activate the “relaxation response”

1. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Lie comfortably on your back
- Start with toes and feet, then ankles and calves, knees and thighs, buttocks, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms and hands – contract the muscles in each of these areas in turn, hold tightly for a few seconds and then release the muscles
- Then move to the neck, face, mouth and eyes, contracting and releasing the muscles in the same way
- Finally contract all the muscles once or twice at the same time and then release
- Then turn on your side and enjoy the feeling of relaxation

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Learn to Relax

2. Deep breathing exercises

- Lie down on a blanket on the floor. Bend your knees up toward you and move your feet until they are about eight inches apart with your toes turned slightly outward. Keep your spine as straight as possible.
- Scan your whole body and look for any places that feel tense.
- Put one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest.
- Inhale slowly through your nose into the abdomen so that it pushes your hand up. The hand on your chest should only move up a little bit. Hold your breath and count to five.
- Smile slightly and then exhale through your mouth taking as long as possible, making a 'shushing' sound as you do so.
- Repeat this at least five times. Try to increase the time you spend doing your deep breathing exercise to five or ten minutes.
- When you have completed the exercise, scan your body again to see if any tension remains.
- Once you are comfortable with this technique, you can use it while you are sitting or standing, whenever you feel any tension in your body.

3. Guided imagery

In this exercise the focus is on detailed images like a walk on the beach or in the forest. It's like a controlled daydream which allows you to shut out stressful thoughts and relieve bodily tension.

Step 1 – Set aside a few minutes when you can be quiet and undisturbed

Step 2 – Sitting quietly in a comfortable chair free of muscle tension is best. Lying down may be too relaxing and you could drift off to sleep which would mean that you weren't practicing the technique!

Step 3 – Close your eyes

Step 4 – Breathe deeply in and out

Step 5 – Choose a scene that appeals to you – like a walk on the beach or being in a garden or forest or any other situation which has peaceful, relaxed associations for you.

Step 6 – When you feel ready to leave your 'calm scene,' retrace your steps back to where you began, count slowly back from 10 to 1 and then open your eyes.

Example: You are walking down a long flight of stairs. Notice the colour, style and material of the stairs. Take note of how it feels as you put down each foot and absorb your surroundings.

Feel the texture of the banister underneath your fingers. Count as you descend the ten stairs pausing to look around you on each step – one – two – three – four – five – six – seven – eight – nine – ten. What do you see at each point? At the foot of the stairs is a passage with doors leading off of it. Choose a door that leads outside and walk through it. Walk down the brick path and notice the warm, sunny spring day. Feel the sun warming your face and body. Listen to all the different songs of the birds and how they seem to harmonise perfectly. Absorb the colours in the large, rambling garden around you – trees, flowers, foliage. Find your favourite flower in the garden and smell its fragrance. Make your way to the little river running through the garden and sit down beside it. Enjoy the sights, sounds and scents of this idyllic place. Listen for the soft rippling sounds of the running water and trail your fingers in it. What does it feel like? Maybe you will cup your hands and drink some or splash it on your face. Watch the insects and butterflies flitting from one flower to another. Look for birds' nests in the trees and feel a gentle breeze ruffle your hair and your clothing.

NB - When you feel ready to leave your 'calm scene,' retrace your steps back to where you began, count slowly back from 10 to 1 and then open your eyes.

Try combining all three of the techniques

For a very good exercise in relaxation, first do the progressive muscle relaxation; then focus on your breathing. Once your body is in a relaxed state, engage in the guided imagery exercise.

Remember to practice regularly

Sometimes students ask why it is so important to learn to relax. The reason is that tension or anxiety and relaxation are incompatible. That means we do one or the other. So when we relax the mind, we exclude the tension in our muscles which reduces stress and anxiety. Once you have learned what this feels like, it will become a matter of practice to be able to induce a state of relaxation.

What should I do if my stress is out of control

This brochure has introduced you to some useful techniques to manage the "flight – or – fight" response that is part of our normal reaction to stress. They are only a guide. If stress is causing significant or ongoing difficulties or if there are signs of stress-related illnesses, you should speak to a suitably qualified health professional such as your doctor, your Campus Health Service, or a student counsellor on your campus.

Contact numbers (Office Hours: 08:00 –16:30)

- South Campus: Embizweni Building: **041 504 2511**
- North Campus: (Opposite the Goldfields Auditorium): **041 504 3222**
- Second Avenue Campus: (Opposite Cafeteria): **041 504 3854**
- Missionvale Campus: Administration building Office number D126: **041 5041106**

Campus Health

South Campus: **041 504 2174**
North Campus: **041 504 3364**
Missionvale Campus: **041 504 1374**
Second Avenue Campus: **041 504 3762**

If you would like to make an appointment, telephone or call in at our Reception area.

Emergency Contact Details (After Hours)

If you are experiencing a panic attack or severe anxiety symptoms, for example, difficulty breathing or chest pains, contact the following numbers:

SA Anxiety Group (24 hour service): **0800 12 13 14**

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