

Relaxation Information Pack

The Stress Response

What is stress? I'm sure the word stress conjures up a different picture in everybody's mind. Perhaps driving in the rush hour traffic or going round the supermarket to get the weekly shopping. Maybe sitting an exam or speaking in public? You may feel tense or wound up just thinking about certain situations in your life.

When we encounter situations in our life that our brain thinks are potentially 'dangerous' then it will activate our 'Stress Response'. This response is often called the 'Fight, Flight or Freeze Response. It prepares our body for action. It is an ancient response that our cavemen ancestors would have needed to deal with the very real threats that they faced on a daily basis. It literally prepares our bodies to fight (a saber-toothed tiger, or an enemy), or run away (flight) or to stay very still, in the hope that we might not be noticed and the danger would pass (Freeze).



Although we no longer face the same dangers that we did in prehistoric times we are still equipped with the same response. Whenever we encounter any form of threat the brain initiates this response. I am sure you will recognise the symptoms listed below:

Symptoms of the 'Stress Response'

- Raised heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Sweating
- Shallow rapid breathing
- Feeling faint/dizzy
- Dry mouth
- **Shakiness**
- Butterflies in the stomach
- Pounding heart
- Sudden urge to go to the loo
- Lumps in throat and difficulty swallowing

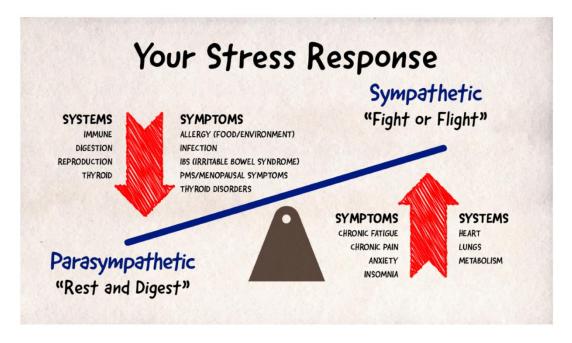




The Autonomic Nervous System is responsible for all the vital bodily processes that happen automatically without our conscious control. For example, it controls your heart beat, your breathing, your temperature, your immune system, and your digestion.

There are two parts to the Autonomic Nervous System. One is designed to hype up the body to prepare it for stress, the other is there to calm it down and give it a breather.

- 1. **The Sympathetic Nervous System** hypes us up. It causes the heart rate to increase, the muscles to tense, our breathing to become more rapid, our skin to sweat, and our pupils to dilate. All designed so that we can fight, flight or freeze.
- 2. The Parasympathetic Nervous System calms us down. It slows the heart and our breathing; it allows the muscles to relax and digestion to take place and makes us feel calm and relaxed. We often call this the 'Relaxation Response' or 'Rest and Digest'.



The stress response is designed to protect us, not harm us and it is a normal process that happens on a regular basis. Some stress such as exercising or doing exciting, enjoyable activities is beneficial. However, if we are constantly activating the stress response and never in a state of rest and relaxation then we quickly become exhausted and our physical and mental wellbeing are affected. You might recognise some of the problems that can occur listed on the next page.

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Long-term symptoms of stress

- Bowel and urinary problems
- Indigestion, constipation, diarrhoea
- Persistent tiredness/fatigue
- Problems sleeping
- Headaches, muscle aches and pain
- Poor concentration and memory
- Nausea
- Tendency to worry
- Fear of the future
- Feeling unable to cope
- Loss of sense of humour
- Loss of appetite
- Sudden emotional outbursts of anger, or tears
- Constant irritability

Ongoing pain or concerns about your health can be major causes of stress in our lives. When we have persistent pain we can spend a lot of time worrying about what has caused it, whether there is a cure and if it will ever go away. We might imagine all sorts of frightening things about what is causing our pain and what might happen to us in the future. We are likely to experience frustration when we can't do the things we always used to do and we will have permanent muscle tension around the areas that are painful. All of these factors will constantly fire up the stress response putting us on 'red alert' making us feel anxious and unable to relax. This will set up a vicious cycle where our pain leads to the stress response and the stress response leads to ongoing muscle tension and further increases in our pain.

We need to find a way to break this cycle and one way to do this is by using Relaxation techniques.

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Relaxation

In the busy modern world, few of us prioritise making time for rest and recuperation. Having enough, 'down time' and good quality sleep is important for everyone, but even more so when you are living with persistent pain. When we ask people: "What do you do to relax?", many of them say "nothing", or "I don't know how to relax", or "I haven't got time for that!". Many think that spending time relaxing is just lazy.



What is relaxation?

What does the word 'relaxation' mean to you? The word may conjure up a picture in your mind, such as sitting by the fire and reading a book. Or perhaps you imagine laying on a beach. Maybe you play sport, watch television, or have a cigarette to relax? Often people think they are relaxing when they are not. Relaxation does not mean simply sitting still and doing nothing. You can be very tense while sitting still if you are worrying about the frustrations of the day.

Relaxation is a skill that can be easily learned. It provides our bodies and our minds with a period of rest. A chance to recharge our batteries. It is a process of reducing tension in every muscle in your body. It also means allowing the mind to become less active, giving it a break, slowing down the thoughts that race through your mind. Relaxation techniques are deliberate ways to train your mind and body to feel as fully relaxed as possible.

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The first thing that anyone who suffers from persistent pain, fatigue or anxiety needs to do is learn a reliable, enjoyable way to relax. Of course, if you suffer from any of these conditions relaxing is probably the very thing that you find hardest to do. For many people relaxing is not something that comes naturally. It is no use just telling yourself, or someone else, to 'calm down' and to 'relax'.

In this 'Relaxation Information Pack' we aim to help you understand more about the benefits of relaxation and introduce you to a wide range of relaxation techniques that you can easily practice at home.



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Relaxation is especially valuable when you have persistent pain because it:

- **Reduces muscle tension**, and the pain from tight over sensitive muscles. It is impossible to have ongoing pain without having muscle tension. Wherever you have an area of pain you will have an area of tight muscles. Unfortunately, when muscles are tense, it can cause additional pain, or make existing pain worse. Many people find their muscles go into muscle spasm, which is incredibly painful and can feel like you are locked into position. Learning to notice when your muscles are tense is helpful so that you can reduce it before it builds up and makes the pain worse. Relaxation allows blood to flow more easily to those tight and oversensitive muscles that contribute to your pain.
- Releases natural chemicals in the brain which reduce pain and produce feelings of calm. These chemicals are called 'endorphins'. Endorphins are hormones which are the body's natural pain killers. Endorphins are also responsible for improving sleep and for increasing feelings of enjoyment, calmness and wellbeing.
- Will train your brain and nervous system to calm down, which can reduce your pain levels
- Helps to reduce stress and anxiety by shifting your attention away from worrying thoughts and distressing images in your mind
- **Improves your sleep**. We know that pain disturbs sleep. When we are not sleeping properly, we feel tired, low in energy and low in mood. We cannot concentrate and our memory is affected. Lack of sleep leads to more aches and pain, and makes it harder to cope with your pain. Relaxation can help you get off to sleep more easily and to return to sleep if you wake in the night.
- Improves concentration and memory
- Improves digestion
- Lowers the heart rate and blood pressure

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Breathing

Most of the time we are not aware of our breathing. It is controlled without us even thinking about it. People who are anxious, tense or in pain, tend to breathe quickly and shallowly, or may hold their breath. These patterns of breathing will tell the brain that we are being threatened in some way and so it will trigger the body's alarm systems and cause the 'Stress Response' we mentioned above. We know the stress response can cause more problems by keeping us breathing in a shallow rapid way, increasing our muscle tension and increasing our pain. That vicious cycle we talked about!

Over time this pattern of breathing can become a habit and we end up with ongoing tension without even realising it. Stopping and noticing what is happening with your breath and learning some simple breathing techniques can change this situation.



If you want to see how breathing is affected by muscle tension then try this:

- Clench your fist, and notice what happens to your breath.
- You will probably find that you hold your breath and it feels like it is frozen in your chest or abdomen.
- Now relax your fist and notice how your breathing relaxes too, and becomes freer and easier.

This is what is happening to your breathing when you have ongoing pain. When you always have muscle tension then it will cause you to hold your breath and breathe differently. This will cause your body to constantly be on red alert and having a stress response.

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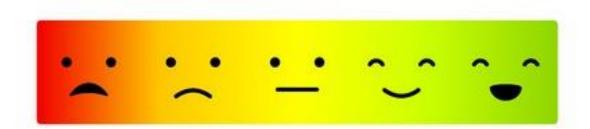
Your emotional state

Your mood and your feelings also affect how you breathe.

Imagine for a few moments a situation that makes you feel uneasy.

Now imagine a situation which makes you feel calm and at ease.

Did you notice any change in your breathing pattern from one situation to the other?



Calm breathing tends to have a slow rate; stressful breathing has a more rapid one.

Calm breathing tends to occur from your abdomen, from that soft area between the bottom of your ribs and your belly button. Whereas when you are anxious or in pain your breathing come from high in your chest.

By deliberately slowing down the rate at which you breathe you will cause the Parasympathetic Nervous system to work and this will calm your body and your mind down allowing you to relax.

Breathing techniques are easy to learn and can be carried out anywhere.

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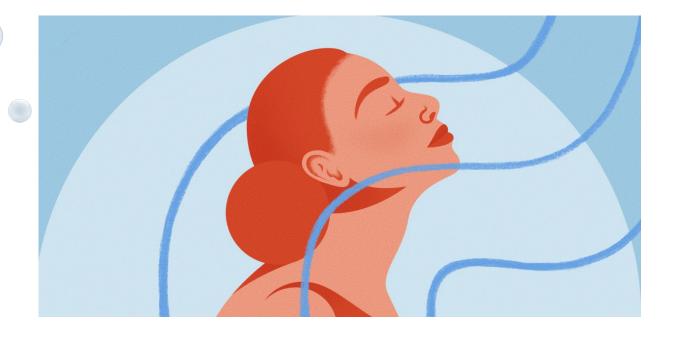
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Breathing Awareness

Most people never really think about their breathing. They have no idea what their breathing pattern is like or where they breathe from, so first of all let's learn how you breathe!

- Make yourself comfortable. It is often easiest to lie down for this exercise.
- Place one of your hands on your belly, the soft area between your ribs and belly button.
- Place your other hand on your chest.
- Focus your attention on your hands.
- Notice what happens to your hands as your breath moves into and out of your body. As the air flows into your lungs notice whether your hands move at all.
- Does the hand on the chest rise? Or does the hand on your belly rise when you breathe in?
- Or perhaps you notice that when you breathe in the hand on your belly drops because the air feels like it is being sucked in when you breath in?



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Belly breathing

Ideally you should breathe using the 'diaphragm', which is the big flat muscle that separates your chest from the abdomen. When you use this muscle you are using the full extent of your lungs. This is called diaphragmatic or belly breathing. As you breathe in, the diaphragm muscle moves down and your belly bulges out. When you breathe out the diaphragm moves up and the belly goes down.

If you watch a baby breathing you will see that their belly rises and falls with the breath. Many people breathe high up in the chest and use the muscles in their neck, shoulders and ribs to breathe. These muscles are not designed to do this for long periods and they can get tired and uncomfortable quite quickly. Breathing like this uses a lot of energy.

Let's try breathing from your belly.

- Make yourself comfortable as you did before, lying on your back if possible.
- Place one of your hands on your belly, the soft area between your ribs and belly button.
- Place your other hand on your chest. Focus your attention on your hands.
- Now try and breathe using your belly. As you breathe in, the air moves into your lungs, and your belly rises.
- As you breathe out, the air flows out of your lungs, and your belly sinks down.
- The hand on your belly should gently rise and fall with the breath.
- If you want you can place both hands on your belly so that your middle fingers are just touching at the tips. Place your awareness on your hands and allow your breath to happen naturally. You should find that the hands rise and separate as you breathe in, then fall back down so the middle fingers are touching again as you breathe out.

Sometimes people find it difficult to allow their belly to expand during the in breath. This is probably because of years of holding our stomachs in.

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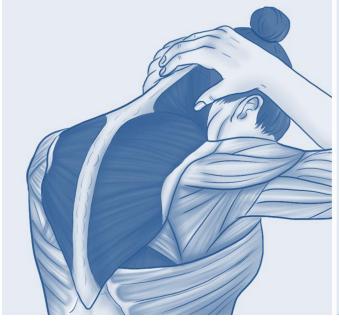
To help you breathe from your belly imagine that there is a hollow space inside your abdomen. As you breathe in the air travels down to fill the space and makes your abdomen swell. As you breathe out the air moves out of the abdomen and it sinks back down. Some people imagine that when they breathe in the air is filling a balloon and when they breathe out the balloon is deflating.

In peace...out tension!

Imagine that when you breathe in, you are breathing in a sense of calm and peace. And when you breathe out you are letting go of all your tension and stress.

Breathing in peace and calm....breathing out tension and stress...

Imagine this however you like. You might imagine that you are breathing in golden sunshine or a calming colour of your choice and as you breathe out there is a colour that represents the tension that is leaving your body. Imagine the tension moving out with the air or out from your fingertips and/or toes.





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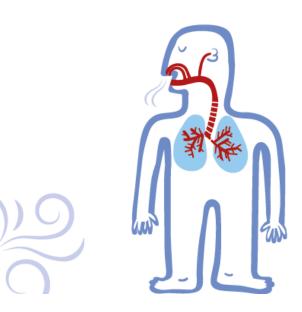
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If in doubt...breathe out!

The most important thing to learn when you want to relax and calm down your mind and body is to make your out breath, longer than your in breath. This signals to your brain that everything is ok and you can go into a relaxed state. Just doing this will calm you down, because out breaths stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and cause the body to have a relaxation response. Your blood pressure goes down, the heart rate slows and emotional arousal goes down, allowing more clear and logical thinking.

Any breathing rhythm where the out breath lasts longer than the in breath will relax you. You can breathe in for 2 and out for 4. You can breathe in for 3 and out for 5. If you prefer to count guickly then try 7-11 breathing. If you don't want to count and find this actually causes stress then don't worry about counting at all, just focus on the out breath, and every time you breathe out do so as slowly as possible. Some people like to silently repeat a word to themselves as they breathe out. For example, Calm, or Peace. Every time you breathe out and let go of any tension, say your word to yourself.

Find out what works for you. It doesn't matter what you count, or even if you count, as long as the out breath is longer than the in breath.



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Try this relaxation exercise:

Make sure you are in a comfortable position. You can lie on your back on a bed or sit in a comfortable chair where your body is well supported.

- Imagine every time that you breathe out you are allowing your body to relax.
- Every time you breathe out imagine your muscles letting go, unwinding and releasing tension.
- You might want to move your attention around your body. You can start with your feet, and imagine them relaxing as you breathe out... then moving up to your legs... letting them relax with every out breath you take...keep moving around your body relaxing as you breathe out...move to your hips...then your back... your belly.... your chest... your shoulders... your neck... your forehead.... your eyes... your cheeks and your jaw.
- Every time you breathe out, allow yourself to relax more and more deeply.
- Feel your body sinking down into the chair or bed that you are resting on.
- Allow your body to become heavy, warm, and comfortably relax. Releasing any muscle tension every time you breathe out.
- Take your time and enjoy the feeling of letting go.

In his book 'The Stress Solution', Dr Rangan Chatterjee has a helpful section on the importance of breathing. He describes a 'Breathing menu' of techniques that you might find helpful.

3-4-5 Breath

This is a quick way to calm down. It is nice and easy.

Breathe in for three seconds, hold for four seconds and breathe out for five seconds.

Do a few rounds of this breathing pattern, or do it for five minutes.

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Box Breathing

Here is another simple technique where you count your breaths.

Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds, hold for four seconds.

Imagine that each four seconds you are moving along the side of an imaginary box, or drawing one in the air with your mind and your breath.

Alternate-nostril breathing

This one takes a bit of patience and dexterity to start with but many people find it very soothing.

Sit comfortably, with your shoulders relaxed.

- Place your right thumb on to your right nostril to block it and breathe out through your left nostril
- Breathe in through your left nostril for a count of four
- Place the middle or ring finger of your right hand on to your left nostril to block it
- Release your right thumb and breathe out through your right nostril for a count of four
- Keeping your fingers where they are. Breathe in through your right nostril for a count of four
- Place the thumb back over the right nostril and breathe out through the left nostril

This is one complete breath cycle. Start off by doing ten breath cycles. You can do more or less depending on the situation.



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Five deep breaths

This is a longer relaxation technique using the breath. Read the instructions through first before you start.

Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes.

Pay attention to your breathing. Allow your breath to come into a comfortable rhythm, breathing low down in your belly. Feel your belly rising with the in breath and falling with the out breath.

Imagine that you are in a place where you feel calm and safe. It might be a safe room that you create for yourself or a place that you like to visit, perhaps somewhere that you have been on holiday. Take time to build the scene in your mind. Think about what you can see in that place, what you can hear, any smells that you associate with being there. Notice what it feels like to be there. Calm and safe and relaxed.

When you are ready, I want you to take five deep breaths. For each breath, breathe in slowly, hold your breath for a count of four, then breathe out slowly. With each breath out you will be relaxing a specific area of your body.



(continued on the next page)



FIRST DEEP BREATH Breathe in – hold for 4 – breathe out slowly allowing all the muscles in your head, face and neck to let go and relax

SECOND DEEP BREATH Breathe in – hold for 4 – breathe out slowly allowing all the muscles in your shoulders, arms and hands to relax

THIRD DEEP BREATH Breathe in – hold for 4 – breathe out slowly allowing all the muscles in your back, chest and tummy to let go and relax

FOURTH DEEP BREATH Breathe in – hold for 4 – breathe out slowly allowing all the muscles in your legs and feet to relax

FIFTH DEEP BREATH Breathe in – hold for 4 – breathe out slowly allowing all the muscles in your body to relax. Allowing yourself to go into a relaxed state.



Imagine yourself in that calming, relaxing place in your mind. Every time you breath out allowing the tension in your mind and body to ease. Spend as long as you like in this place and then when you are ready count up from 1-5, open your eyes and take a few moments to return to your normal alert state.

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This exercise is a simple but effective way to relax. Many people find it is helpful to send them off to sleep at night or if they wake during the night. It involves counting up from '1' to '10'.

Close your eyes and take a deep breath.

- Allow yourself to breathe out fully and completely, emptying your lungs
- Breathe in again...and as you breathe in imagine that you see the number 1 in your mind's eye. Focus your attention on the number as you breathe in and mentally say to yourself 'One'.
- Hold your breath for a few seconds.
- Breathe out and imagine the number disappearing.
- Breathe in and imagine that you see the number 2 in your mind's eye. Look at the number as you breathe in and mentally say to yourself 'Two'.
- Hold your breath for a few seconds.
- Breathe out and imagine the number disappearing.
- Breathe in and imagine that you see the number 3 in your mind's eye. Look at the number as you breathe in and mentally say to yourself 'Three'.
- Hold your breath for a few seconds.
- Breathe out and imagine the number disappearing
- Continue counting in this way up to '10' or for as long as you are awake or find it restful to do so. You can choose to count higher than ten or just repeat the sequence of 1-10.

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STOP exercise

If you are feeling anxious or under pressure and you feel that there are lots of thoughts 'buzzing' around in your head, try this exercise to clear your head.

Notice what is happening, pause, spread your hands on a flat surface, say or think to yourself 'STOP!'

You could imagine a big red button that you can hit, and say or think 'STOP', whatever feels right to you.

As you say or think STOP, breathe in slowly and deeply into your belly, hold your breath for a few seconds, then gently breathe out through your mouth, as slowly as possible, relaxing your shoulders as you let your breath go.

Repeat this for a few breaths until you can feel yourself relaxing.







Ragdoll

- Settle yourself in a chair and breathe quietly for a few moments
- Take a deep breath in and then breathe out forcefully.
- As you breathe out let your body go limp.
- Continue to breathe like this for a few breaths allowing your body to become looser and limper each time you breathe out.

Get into the habit of pausing and becoming aware of your breathing every now and then, especially if you notice that you are feeling anxious, tense or in pain. Notice what is happening with your breathing and then do something about it!

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Muscle Relaxation techniques

Posture and body tension

As we mentioned above, when we are in pain, or in a state of stress then we get an increase in muscle tension in our bodies. People are often completely unaware of this build-up of muscle tension until it has become really uncomfortable. Different people will find that they hold their tension in different parts of their body. but there can be places where tension is more likely to occur. If you observe yourself you might find that you often clench your teeth or tense your stomach muscles. Perhaps you hunch your shoulders or hold your hands in a fist or fiddle with something. Perhaps you grind your teeth or have a permanent frown. The jaw, shoulders, back and neck are common areas of tension. Constant muscle tension uses a lot of energy and can leave people feeling tight and exhausted at the end of the day.

The first step in reducing muscle tension is to discover which areas of your body tend to tighten up when you are anxious or in pain.

Right now, check you jaw, tongue, lips to see if they are relaxed or tense. Is your forehead tight? Are your shoulders loose, low and relaxed or are you holding them up near your ears? Go through your body and see where you are holding tension. Once you have an idea which areas are vulnerable you are ready to learn to relax those areas.

Holding our bodies in tense positions signals to our brains that we are under threat so it will fire off the 'stress response'. As we know, the stress response itself creates more muscle tension which makes the situation worse. If we hold these positions for too long then the muscles become tired and very painful. People often describe a burning sensation in their muscles, which is like cramp. When the muscles are held tense then oxygen and other nutrients cannot get to them and waste products cannot get away. There is a build-up of a waste product, called lactic acid, and this is what causes the cramp and pain.

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Keep a watchful eye on your posture. Try to notice what happens to your body when you are in pain or feeling stressed. Notice where you hold your tension. Awareness is the first step in learning to change.

When you notice tension deliberately move your body out of the tense posture and into a more relaxed one. If your muscles are very tense then moving out of the position in itself may be uncomfortable to start with, so move very gently and slowly, and don't stretch your muscles too much to start with.

The following positions may be more comfortable for you.

Shoulders – gently pull your shoulders down. Feel the space between your shoulders and your ears increasing. Stop pulling and notice the new position. Repeat this a few times, slowly and gently, to ease your shoulders down.

Elbows – move your elbows away from your sides, opening your arms up at the elbow joint. Create a space between your arms and your body.

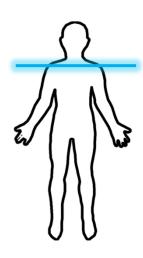
Hands – gently stretch your fingers and thumbs out, separately your fingers and thumb. As you spread your hands the palms tighten. Stop stretching and let your hands rest with the hands in this open position.

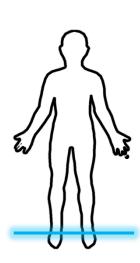
Hips and knees – roll your hips outwards, moving the knees apart. Let your legs settle comfortably.

Feet and ankles – Stretch your toes out and push your feet away, pointing the toes. (Don't stretch too hard otherwise you may induce cramp).

Breathing – become aware of your breathing. Think of that soft area where your belly is, just under your ribcage. Breathe in gently, and feel your belly swelling, let the breath out slowly and feel it sinking down. Take a few deep breaths like this and allow your breathing to come into a comfortable rhythm.

Head – gently stretch your neck, up and back, lengthening your neck at the back and lifting your head up. Imagine that you have a thread attached to the top of your head that is gently lifting your head up and stretching and lengthening your neck.





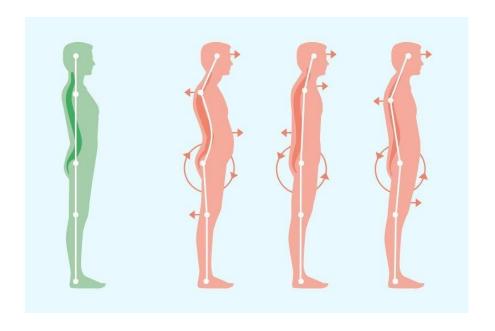
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- **Jaw** pull your lower jaw downwards. Let your teeth come apart. Allow the muscles of your jaw to relax and come back to a position where your lips are just touching. Let your tongue sit loosely behind your teeth with the tip just resting on the back of the front teeth. Allow your throat to loosen.
- **Eyes** close your eyes. Simply lower your eyelids and let your eyes be still for a few moments. Some people like to put the palms of their hands over their eyes for a few moments.
- Forehead and scalp raise your eyebrows and imagine a smoothing action which begins above your eyebrows, rises up into your hairline and over the crown of your head and down into the back of your head. Then relax.

Check in with how your body feels now. Is there any difference? Are there any areas that have gone back to their original position? Is there anywhere that you are still holding tension? Make whatever adjustments feel right for you.

When you are sitting, lying or standing, or even doing jobs around the home or work, get into the habit of checking in on your posture and making changes to it. After a while it will become second nature. The less tension you have the less pain you will have and the more your relaxed you will feel.



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Tense and Relax

One of the ways to relax is to tense and relax each group of your muscles. This can help people to notice the difference between when their muscles are tense and when they are relaxed. Many people find it is a really useful relaxation technique that they can use anywhere. Once you get used to it you might just focus on the areas where you tend to hold tension. Many people like to run through the sequence of movements when they are lying in bed at night before they go to sleep. For some people who have particularly painful joints or muscles they can find that tensing them is very uncomfortable so this may not be the best technique for you. When you are tensing you do not have to use all your power or push yourself so that your pain is increased. There might be some movements that you leave out if you have an area of your body that is particularly uncomfortable. Listen to your own body and experiment with what works best for you.



Get yourself into a comfortable position, in sitting or lying. You can have your eyes open or closed.

Relax your arms by your sides and uncross your legs.

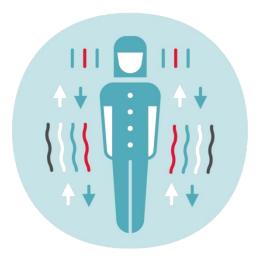
Keep your breathing slow, regular and relaxed. Some people notice that when they tense their muscles they hold their breath. If this is the case for you, make sure that when you relax your muscles you breathe out at the same time, letting go of the breath. Get into a rhythm of breathing in as you tense and breathing out as you relax.

We will be going through a series of movements for each of the muscle groups of the body to help you learn the difference between tension and relaxation.

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- Hands and Forearms tense your hands and forearms by clenching your fists. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how your hands and forearms feel.
- Front Upper arm tense the muscles of your upper arms by bending your arms at the elbows and trying to touch your wrists to your shoulders. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Let your arms fall back by your sides. Notice how your arms feel.
- **Back Upper arm** tense your arms by straightening your arms as much as you can, locking your elbows. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how your arms feel.
- **Shoulders** tense your shoulders by shrugging your shoulders up towards your neck. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how your shoulders feel.
- **Neck** press your head back into the chair, or pillow. Feel the tension in your neck, hold the tension, then relax. Let your head rest back gently and notice how that feels.
- **Forehead** raise your eyebrows. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how that feels.
- **Brow and eyelids** Frown and close your eyes tightly. Feel the tension, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how that feels.



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- **Jaw** bite your teeth together, hold the tension, then relax. Allow your jaw to hang loosely with your teeth slightly parted. Notice how that feels.
- Tongue and throat push the tip of your tongue onto the roof of your mouth. Hold the tension, then relax. Let the tongue lie loosely in your mouth. Notice how that feels.
- **Lips** press the lips tightly together, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how that feels.
- **Chest** take a deep breath in, hold the tension, then breathe out and relax. Notice how that feels.
- **Stomach** tense the muscles of your stomach as if you are about to receive a punch to the stomach. Brace the muscles, hold the tension, then relax. Notice how that feels.
- **Back** arch your back and tense your buttocks. Hold the tension, the relax. Notice how that feels.
- **Legs** straighten your legs, tensing the muscles and pointing the toes. Hold the tension, then relax and let your legs rest comfortably on the chair or bed. Notice how that feels.



Now that you have tensed and relaxed all your muscles, bring your awareness to your whole body. Does it feel different now? Can you allow the feeling of relaxation to spread through your body? Can you use your breath to let go of any remaining tension in your muscles? If there are areas of tension try to breathe into and out of that area and with every out breath allow the tension to let go a little more.

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Using your imagination to relax

Our minds are always building pictures and movies inside our heads. Some are pleasant...many are not! People vary in how vivid or clear the images that they create in their mind are but we all have a way of using our imagination to think about the world. Imagination is not just about creating pictures, you can imagine smells, sounds, textures and tastes.

Our minds do not distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. You only have to think about something that is worrying you and you know that it can have an instant impact on your body. A worrying thought or image can trigger the stress response which instantly leads to an increase in your heart rate, breathing and muscle tension. But, we can take control of this ability and get our imaginations to work for us, rather than against us when we are doing relaxation. In this section we are going to look at some ways that you can use your imagination to help you relax.



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Creating a safe and special place

You can make relaxing even more pleasant by using your mind to take yourself away to some imaginary place that for you represents peace, calm or relaxation. It can be a real place that you love to go to or somewhere that you create from your imagination. People often choose to imagine themselves walking on empty beaches by the sea or in the mountains or by a stream or sitting in their own gardens. You can make the scene whatever you want it to be. It just needs to be somewhere that you feel you could relax. If you are more relaxed when there are other people around, incorporate them into your imaginary scene.

If you relax through doing physical activity, such as playing football or squash, dancing, cycling or walking in the park, you might want to imagine yourself enjoying that activity.

Wherever you choose to be and whatever you choose to do there, concentrate on making your imaginary scene as real as it can be.

To take yourself deeper into the relaxation you need to focus much more closely on the details of your surroundings. The following prompts will help you deepen your experience of this relaxation. You are going to tune in to all your senses noticing what you can see, hear, feel and smell in this place.

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- Look around you, look at what you can see in this special place. What is around you? What is under you? What is above you?
- Are you sitting, lying or moving?
- Look at the colours, shapes and patterns around you
- Listen, what can you hear? What sounds are around you?
- Can you hear your heartbeat, or the sound of your breath?
- Now pay attention to how it feels to be in this place. Firstly, notice the sensations of the ground, what does it feel like to be on this surface? Is it warm, cold, soft, hard, or smooth? Are there any particular textures you notice in this place?
- Notice the temperature of the air on your face and skin. Is the air still or is there a breeze?
- Reach out and touch something in your surroundings, and pay attention to how it feels
- Take a deep breath in through your nose and smell the air. What scents can you pick up? Is there a faint aroma in the air, or a smell that wafts under your nose? Enjoy the different scents that surround you.



You might find that one of your senses is more vivid than another. Just focus on whatever you find easiest.

Savour your time in this place. A special place of calm and safety. A place where no one is bothering you or disturbing you, where you can relax for a while. Notice how calm and relaxed you feel here. You can return to this place in your mind whenever you need to feel relaxed.

The Safe Room

Some people like to create their own special 'room' that they can relax in. A room can make you feel safer than an outside space because you have the ability to close (and lock) the door and imagine that no one can get to you. Once again, you can create a room from your imagination or use a real room that you have in mind.

- Picture your room. Think about what size it is. What shape it is.
- Are there windows in it? What size are they? Where are they?
- When you look out of the windows what view do you have? Or what would your ideal view be? Maybe you can look out onto a beach, or a beautiful garden, or rolling countryside. You are free to choose what you create.
- What colour is your room? Are the walls painted? Or wallpapered?
- Think about the flooring. Do you have carpet, tiles, or large rugs? What colour is the floor?
- What about curtains? Are they bright, flowery, striped?
- What furniture do you have in your room? Do you have a lovely chair or a bed that you can rest on? What is it like?
- What else is in your room? Bookshelves? Tables? What things would you like to surround you?

Spend as much time as you like creating this special place for you. A place where you feel safe, calm and relaxed. A place where you can come to in your mind whenever you want to be calm and at peace. Imagine yourself resting in that room, feeling safe and calm, away from all the normal stresses in the world.



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Other ideas for relaxing scenes

Here are a few imaginary scenes that you might want to use for relaxing. Read them through and see if you could imagine yourself relaxing in these places. They might give you some ideas of places to escape to in your mind when you want to feel calm.

- 1. The Spring imagine a rocky cleft in which a natural spring arises. It is a warm sunny day. See the bubbling jet of water sparkling in the sunlight. Listen to it gurgling and splashing. The water is clear and pure. Cup your hands and drink from it. Feel the water travelling through your body. Step into the spring and feel the water flowing over you. Flowing over your feet, your legs and the whole of your body. Imagine the water flowing through your thoughts and your emotions, feel the water cleansing you. Let the energy of the spring water fill you with energy.
- 2. The Sunny Beach see yourself lying on the warm sand of a sunny beach. You are lying in a sheltered part of the beach protected from the wind and the waves. You feel calm and safe. You watch the sun dancing on the water. You see the waves rolling into the shore and then rolling out again. Just coming in and out...ebbing and flowing. You smell the sea air. You hear the birds calling as they fly on the breeze. You feel the sun on your skin. You feel the grains of dry sand run through your fingers and under your feet.



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3. The River Bank – see yourself lying on the soft, long grass. It is early summer. The weather is sunny and warm. You are in a green meadow that rolls down to the river. You can smell the scents that rise from the wild flowers in the meadow. There is a gentle breeze soothing and calming you. Closing your eyes you become aware of the sound of water flowing...of birds calling.



4. The Scented Garden – picture yourself lying on a newly mown lawn with the sun warming your body. Imagine the smell of the grass and the flowers. Reach out and feel the texture of the grass on your fingers. You can see the trees surrounding you swaying in the breeze. You can see the flowers around the edge of the lawn, a beautiful array of colours dancing in the light and moving with the breeze. Notice what colours you see, notice what varieties of plants are there. Imagine the scents of those flowers. You hear the distant sound of birdsong. You close your eyes and let the sun warm you as you lie there feeling calm and peaceful



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Specific visualisations for pain

Here are some different ways to use your imagination to reduce pain.

- 1. Try moving the pain out of the body. Every time you breathe out imagine your pain is leaving your body and passing out from your fingertips or toes and into the air beyond your body.
- 2. Imagine that the pain is a size or shape. Whatever size or shape comes to mind then make it smaller or change its shape. Play around with this image of your pain and see if changing the image changes your pain experience.
- 3. Imagine that the feeling of pain is replaced by another sensation. Think about how it feels...sharp, stabbing, aching, tingling and so on. Can you change those sensations? Can you create a feeling of warmth, or buzzing, or heaviness. Play around with the sensations and see what happens.
- 4. Give your pain a colour. Pick whatever colour comes to mind. Maybe your pain is black, or red? Can you change the colour? Can you change it to a colour that you associate with relaxation? See if by changing the colour you can change how it feels and make it more comfortable. If you like just fade the colour away until it is gone completely.
- 5. Imagine that you have a control centre in your brain that controls your pain. In this control centre there are lots of dials that can turn your pain levels up or down. Perhaps you have a remote control to operate the controls. Imagine the controls however you want to. When you change the 'controls' you can turn your pain up and down.
- 6. Imagine a time when you were free of pain. Think about what you are doing. Notice what is happening and how you feel. Stay with this image. Return to it often when you are relaxing and just during moments in your day.

These are just a few ways that you can use your imagination to change your pain. Try them out and see what happens. If you have a good imagination you can be as creative as you like in finding other ways to change your pain experience.

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Distancing

The imagination is very powerful and you can use images to help you deal with all sorts of distressing thoughts or emotions. You can use your imagination to mentally step back from situations, to give yourself a feeling of distance from what is going on. For example, if you have particular worries or difficult emotions you may want to imagine them leaving you in any one of the following ways.

You may imagine your worries or emotions are:

- Leaves floating downstream
- Clouds moving across the sky
- Balloons rising up into the sky
- Bubbles floating away on the air
- A train leaving the station





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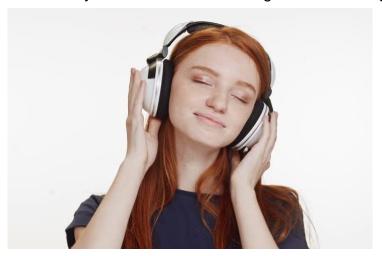
Transformation

You can also use your imagination to transform images. We often have 'scary movies' or pictures in our minds that accompany our worries. Sometimes playing around with these pictures can make them easier to deal with and reduce our distress.

When you have particularly difficult images that keep coming to mind start seeing if you can change them.

- If you are actually present in the picture, imagine that you are stepping out of the picture so it feels as if it is happening to someone else. You could also imagine that you are looking down on the image from high above, like you are observing what is happening from a distance.
- If the image is close up in your mind, imagine moving it far far away into the distance so you can hardly see it. Or shrink it down so it is a tiny speck.
- If there are other people in the image you can make them small or make them cartoon like. Or you might want to bring in a 'person' who is there to support and protect you.
- If it is moving make it still.
- If the image is in colour change it to black and white or fade all the colour out of the scene.
- If there is sound, make it quiet so you can't hear what is being said. Or you might want to add soundtrack music that is comical or relaxing.

Do whatever you can to make that image less disturbing



Colour relaxation exercises

Many people find that colours can have a strong effect on their mood and influence how they feel. We notice how the colours that we paint our homes can stimulate or relax us. Blue and green are said to be calming. Red and yellow are said to be stimulating and make you feel happier. We can make use of the effect that colour has on our mood during relaxation exercises too. By imagining different colours we can soothe ourselves when we are anxious or raise our mood when we are feeling low.

Here are a few imaginary scenes using colours that you might want to try and see if they help you.

Scene One – The coloured room

Imagine yourself in a room decorated in a colour of your choice. You might already have a safe room that you use for relaxation and you can use this room if you like, or create a new or different one for this exercise.

See the room painted in a colour that you find calms you. Imagine the walls, ceiling, paintwork, carpet, furnishings are all coloured how you want them to be in a colour that calms and relaxes you. Maybe there are different shades of the same colour. Maybe you choose different colours for the furniture, or the walls, or the curtains.

Totally immerse yourself in the colours and notice the effects it has on you.

Maybe you want to change the colours...maybe you imagine yourself with a paint brush painting the room...or using a paint roller...just play with the colour and the scene until you have it how you want it.

Then find somewhere in that room to rest and relax and take in everything around you

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Scene Two – Bathing in colour

Make yourself comfortable. Close your eyes and imagine a colour that feels right for you. Pick it spontaneously without much thought. You can picture it in brushstrokes...or coloured cloth...or as a tinted mist...or a coloured atmosphere. Imagine the colour all around you.

Feel yourself relaxing in this colour. Becoming surrounded by the colour, maybe becoming part of the colour. Absorbing the colour through every pore in your skin until your body is filled with it.

Now let the colour start to shine out from you. Feel yourself releasing the colour into the air around you until it gradually fills the room that you are in. As you send out more and more colour into the space around you see how much you can colour with it.

Pause for a moment and then slowly imagine drawing the colour back into your body...imagine it coming back into your body from all around you. As the colour comes back into your body it gets deeper and stronger until it gathers all around you in a cloud.

Feel yourself bathed in the colour. Absorb it back into your body.

If you want to you can imagine bathing and relaxing in the colour...or perhaps you want to imagine it leaves you and goes back to the space around you colouring the room you are in.

Notice the effect this has on you.



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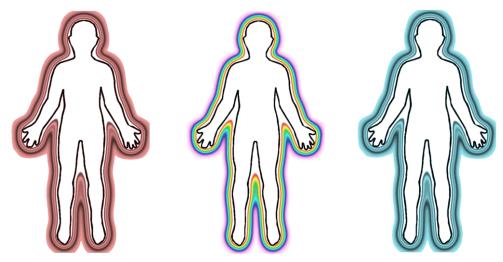
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Scene Three – Healing Aura

Imagine that your whole body is surrounded by a healing aura. A circle of healing light. It can be any colour you choose...any colour that comes to mind when you think of healing. You can imagine the light protecting you, calming you, soothing you.

You might sense the light moving around your body. Imagine that it circles around you in all directions, gently moving and circling around your body.



You can imagine that all your stress and tension are absorbed into this light aura. All your stress drains away into the aura leaving you feeling calm, comfortable and relaxed.

Maybe the colour of the aura changes...maybe it stays the same but gets stronger and brighter.

Imagine that when you stop the session today that the aura remains surrounding you, protecting you as you go about your daily life.

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Scene Four – Healing Light

Imagine yourself in a special place. You can use your usual safe place that you have for relaxation or create a new place for this exercise. Create or choose somewhere that makes you feel safe, calm and relaxed. A place where you can come to heal and relax.

Imagine as you lie there you notice an aura of light starting to form all around you and you can feel power and energy coming from the light.

Perhaps you are aware of the colour of the healing light. You feel safe and calm. You feel that healing can take place here.

And you sense that the light touches your forehead. You feel a gentle warming sensation that flows through your body...spreading from the top of your head where the light touched you. Moving through every muscle...every cell...every fibre of your being...calming you down.

You feel the healing energy at work within you. The healing light continues moving over your body, concentrating on those parts which need that healing attention, spreading warmth...a glowing healing light spreading throughout your body.

Notice how soothing and calming that feeling is as it spreads through your face...head...neck and down your shoulders, arms and into your hands. Moving around your back...into your hips and flowing down your legs and into your feet.

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And as the healing light continues to gently touch every part of your body, just concentrate on that feeling of calm and that sensation of healing warmth...a growing sensation that surrounds your whole body bathing you in that healing light.

Just be still, bathing in that healing light. This is a place that you can come back to whenever you want to enjoy some peace and calm. Allow that healing light to work within you...soothing and relaxing you.

And now imagine that the healing light is fading away but this healing light will remain with you...the healing light will continue to calm you as you go about your day.

When you are ready come back to the room, and have a gentle stretch and in your own time go back to your day.

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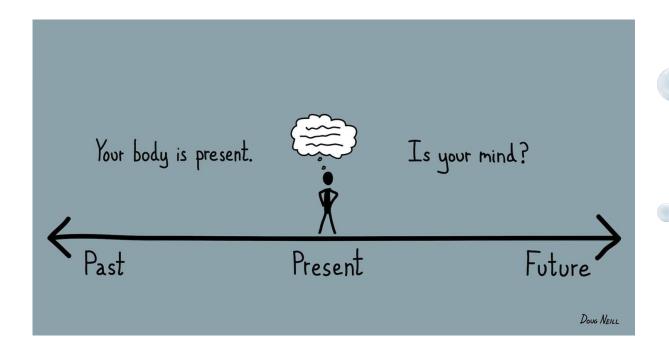
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Mindfulness

All of us spend a lot of time in our heads thinking about our lives. We don't tend to spend much time 'in the moment', absorbed in what we are doing. We often do things absent mindedly, while we are thinking about something else, or worrying about something in the past or what is going to happen in the future. Mindfulness is about connecting us to the here and now; it is bringing us back to what is actually happening now. It can be surprisingly hard to do, because our minds love to think, but it can be very helpful to create a pause, and to bring yourself out of those worrying that can create stress and muscle tension.

Here are a few mindfulness exercises:



Focus on the task in hand

- Decide to give your complete attention to a simple task you are familiar and comfortable with. For instance, if you are washing up, be aware of all the movements you make, as you make them. Be aware of the temperature of the water on your hands...the feeling of the items you are washing...the texture of the items...the feeling of the washing up suds. Let your focus be entirely on the activity you are engaged in and what you are seeing and sensing, rather than thinking about what you are doing.
- Your mind will keep wandering off...perhaps to other concerns or worries...just be aware that your mind has drifted off into thinking and bring yourself back to the task in hand. Your aim is to experience what you are doing, not to think about it or make judgements.
- Whatever your chosen activity, whether it is cooking, eating, dusting, brushing your teeth, having a shower, or drinking a cup of coffee, follow the same pattern: be aware of every action that you are taking, moment by moment...notice the textures, the colours, any sounds, or smells that you are aware of.
- Taking a little time to practice periods of mindfulness will give you a welcome break from the never-ending thoughts and worries that run through your mind and make you less stressed and anxious.

Five things

Pause. Notice what is happening with your breathing.

Pause. Notice five things that you can see in the place where you are.

Now, notice five things that you can hear

Notice five things that you can touch or feel

Maybe notice any smells that are in that place.

Really tune into your senses.

Now come back to an awareness of your breathing.

Notice the in breath....notice the out breath...just happening all by itself.

Notice your thoughts....

Notice your feelings...

Just pause and be aware of what is happening for you right now.

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Three Minute Breathing Space

This is designed to create a deliberate pause in your day. To notice what is happening for you. To check in with how you are feeling physically and emotionally.

Step One: Becoming aware - What's up right now? - Pause what you are doing. Adopt an erect posture, either in sitting or standing. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your body and your inner experience. Just noticing what is happening for you in this moment.

- What thoughts are going through your mind?
- What feelings are you experiencing? If there are uncomfortable feelings just acknowledging them without trying to change them.
- What body sensations are here right now? Perhaps scan the body to pick up any sensations. Maybe you notice areas of tightness or discomfort.

Step Two: Coming to the breath - Having tuned in to what is happening in this moment take your attention to your breath and for a little while follow each in breath and each out breath. Just breathing. Following the breath and staying with the sensations that come with each in breath and out breath

Step Three: Expanding attention – Now expand your awareness to include the breath and a sense of the body as a whole, notice your facial expression, your posture, your breathing. Just being aware of whatever is here: the breath, your body, your thoughts, your feelings. Breathing into any tensions that you might feel, opening and softening and allowing. Then opening your eyes and bringing your awareness back to the room that you are in.

If you are a person who is always rushing about, just notice this and try to slow down. Notice the pleasurable things around you, no matter how small. Gaze out of window and enjoy the view. Just take a moment to pause every now and then.

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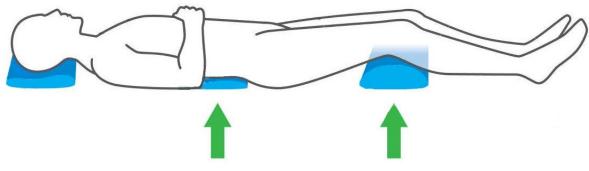
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Making relaxation work for you

Finding a comfortable position. Getting comfortable can be difficult if you experience persistent pain but experiment to see what works best. Here are the four best positions:

- 1. Lying on your back, either on a bed or similar flat surface. Place a small cushion or padding underneath your lower back, and neck. Some people like to place additional pillows or padding under their knees and elbows.
- 2. Lying in the recovery position, so the leg underneath you is straight, and so is the arm underneath you. The arm on top is bent at the elbow and the hand is close to your face, and the leg on top is bent at the knee. Many people find that having a long pillow (a body pillow or an old-fashioned bolster) that they can 'cuddle' and place the top arm and leg onto is comfortable.
- 3. Sitting upright in a supportive armchair. The chair should ideally have a head rest so that the whole of your head and neck is supported, or you should place the chair against the wall so there is support behind your head. Arm rests are also useful to support your arms, wrists and hands. Some people rest their hands on their laps. Your feet should be flat on the floor with your knees at right angles to the floor.
- 4. Sitting at a desk or table with a pillow on top of the desk so that you can lean forward and rest your head and arms forward on the pillow. Sitting so that your feet are flat on the floor and your knees at right angle to the floor.



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Here are some ideas about how you can get into a regular relaxation practice. Firstly, let's look at the practicalities:

- Schedule a time each day when you can practice, undisturbed. You will not just 'find time' for relaxation you will need to 'make time' for relaxation. Start small! Just find 5 minutes in your day to start with. Look for a time that seems to naturally fit with your existing routine. Perhaps after you have your lunch. If you are at work maybe you can do 5 minutes in your car. Perhaps after you have had your tea at night? If you start small it will feel manageable and you will be more likely to carry on and expand the time you take.
- Make relaxation part of your daily routine. Try to practice at the same time every day. This makes it easier to remember to practice and helps it become a daily habit.
- Find a comfortable place for your daily practice. It is helpful to have a dedicated place to go to for your relaxation because your brain will learn to associate that place with relaxing and you will find that it is easier and easier to relax when you go there to practice.
- Make sure the place is warm, or that you have blankets as you can get cool when relaxing.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.
- Some people like to light a candle, or have aromatherapy essences.
- Draw the curtains.
- Dim the lights.
- Put on some relaxing music if you like.
- Tell other people in the house what you are going to do so they will not disturb you during this time. Put a sign up on the door if that helps remind people.
- Switch off your phone.
- If you find it really difficult to find time then try to combine it with other activities such as relaxing when you are having a bath, or use it in bed at night to help you drift into a relaxed sleep.

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Approved by: PIF Trust Docs ID: 17490 Here are some ideas about how to make relaxation work for you:

- Choose a method of relaxation that you enjoy so you stick with it. There are many types of relaxation you can use. Not all of them will work for you. You need to experiment with a few to find which ones you like and which enable you to relax. If one doesn't work for you, don't assume you can't relax.
- 2. When you are first learning to relax it is easier to have an audio recording to listen to that guides you into a relaxed state. There are lots of free audios available that you can listen to online or download.
- 3. Record your own relaxation session. Read a relaxation script aloud and record it on your phone. Talking to yourself in a calm, slow, quiet voice can have a big impact on your brain. The sound of our own voice talking in a relaxed way tells our brain that everything is ok, that we are safe and can calm down. Try it and see what you think. If you have a friend or partner who has a voice you find soothing then you could ask them if they would mind you recording them reading a script.
- 4. **Let relaxation happen**. If you 'try' too hard to relax you won't be able to. Don't get annoyed if you can't do it straightaway. Just take your mind to something that you find nice to think about. Think about someone you love...or a nice place that you like going to. Relaxation will happen.
- At first you may find that you want to fidget or cough, or you may get an itch or a fit of the giggles. But, just feel free to change position, scratch or laugh.



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Notice thoughts



without judgement.

- 6. Allow thoughts to come and go. Don't worry if you find yourself interrupted by thought about things you need to do, or worries you may have. Just be aware of those thoughts, then let them go and bring your thoughts back to the relaxation.
- 7. Some people find that they fall asleep when they are relaxing. This is not a problem. It just indicates that you are relaxing and that you are not getting enough sleep. With more practice you will probably find that you don't do that and that when you 'wake up' you will feel more refreshed.
- 8. The busier and more stressed you are, the more important it is to make relaxation part of your daily routine. You may not have time during the day to do a formal relaxation practice but you can always take a few calming breaths. Link relaxation with other routine tasks that you do throughout the day. Every time you boil the kettle, or go to the toilet...just take a few moments, and take a few deep breaths. It is surprising the difference that it can make to you.
- 9. Enjoy it! You deserve to relax and it is a nice thing to do. Try and look at relaxation as a 'recovery break'. Relaxation is not a luxury it is a necessity. It is an important part of your self-care and therapy routine. It is just as important as taking daily exercise and eating a good diet.



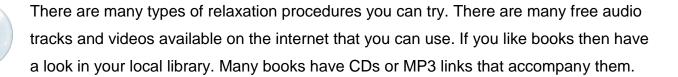
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Relaxation Resources



We have a number of audio tracks for relaxation on the Pain Management Website.

http://www.nnuh.nhs.uk/departments/pain-management/media/

Other ways to relax

We often relax when we do something that we enjoy that absorbs our attention. Here are some examples, but everyone will have different things that work for them so experiment to find things that help you to relax in your life.

- Satisfying hobbies
- Physical exercise
- Creative craft work
- Gardening
- Reading a good book
- Listening to and playing music
- Singing
- Stroking a pet
- Birdwatching
- Taking a long warm, scented bath
- Doing yoga
- Having a coffee with friends
- Watching an engrossing film
- Walking your dog
- A good conversation
- Solving puzzles
- Anything that makes you laugh

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Summary

Relaxation is free, and there are no side effects. But you do have to make some time to practice. Like everything else we need to learn, we need to do it regularly until it becomes natural. We recommend that you start practicing for 5 minutes daily, but ideally for two periods of 15-30 minutes to see really good results.

When you have been practicing for a while you will notice that you can calm down more quickly and you can relax anywhere. As with all skills, practice brings success so be patient with yourself while you are learning.

When it comes to resting and relaxing the key is to find out what works best for you, making sure that you ring fence time to do it, then sticking to it. Finding the balance between work, rest and relaxation is a challenge, but it is essential to find that balance. The benefits it will have to your pain, fatigue and stress are worth the effort.

You may be feeling doubtful that you will ever be able to relax, but we have never come across anyone who couldn't be helped to relax. It is just a matter which works for you. And there will be one. Just a few minutes of calm is a wonderful gift to give to yourself.

If you would like further information advice on relaxation then speak to one of the Pain Management Team.



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