

Relaxation is allowing physical and/or mental tension to be released.

Tension is the body's natural response to threat, part of the body's alarm or survival mechanism. It can be a very useful response but much of the time we don't need this tension so it's okay to let it go.

How relaxation helps:



Reduces tiredness: excessive tension is tiring, learning to relax helps us manage everyday life



Improves performance: through raising self-awareness and learning to control tension



Pain management: pain can occur as a result of holding tension, so pain can ease as tension does. Relaxation can also raise your pain threshold



Coping with stress: helping you to breathe effectively can reduce the impact of stress



Improves sleep



Improves self-confidence: increasing your self-awareness and allowing you to cope with daily living



Improves personal relationships: relating to others is easier when you are more relaxed

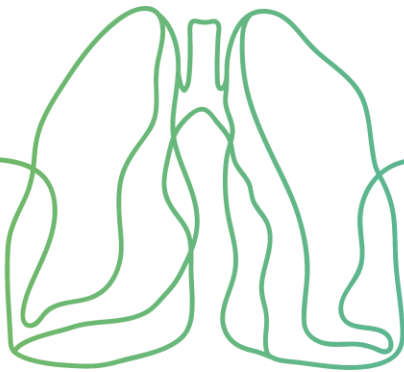
Healthy living is a matter of balance. Relaxation is part of the balancing process along with things like diet and physical activity.

You may already have some relaxation techniques that work for you. But this booklet has some more ideas to try. Relaxation can take practice but practicing regularly means we're better prepared to use it when we are stressed.

Learning to breathe may sound like a strange idea, but often when we're anxious or stressed, our breathing becomes shallower. Relaxation techniques often focus on breathing because it is effective, especially the 'out-breath'.

The out-breath releases tension in the chest muscles, allowing all other muscles to release tension too. The out-breath also stimulates our parasympathetic system (the system responsible for relaxation and rest), sending signals to our body to reduce heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tone.

Breathing is far more effective when we are using our diaphragm, sometimes referred to as Diaphragmatic or Belly Breathing.



Simple 'Belly' Breathing:

1

Sit or lie flat in a comfortable position

2

Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest

3

Take a deep breath in through your nose and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest should not move

4

Breathe out through pursed lips as if you were whistling. Feel the hand on your belly go in

5

Do this breathing 3 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath

6

Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise

When we're feeling overwhelmed or stressed, it can be hard to focus on our breathing or to do it in a way that will be most effective.

Some tips:



If you feel comfortable to do so, try making a "whoosh" sound on the outbreath



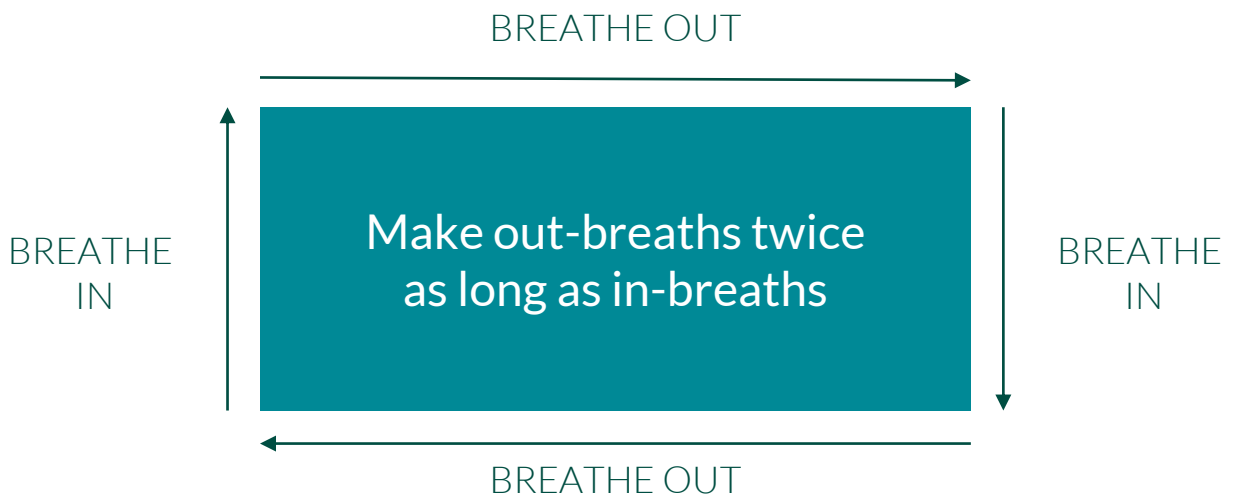
You could prolong a word such as "peace" or "calm" (out loud or to yourself)



If you're out and about and can't find a place to sit or lie down, just try dropping your shoulders, doing two or three slow belly breaths and then continuing with what you were doing, just a little slower

Rectangle breathing

Find something rectangular where you are (a window, a door, a whiteboard, even something like a book or computer screen). Scan the shorter length of the rectangle with your eyes as you breathe in and then time the longer breath out as you move your eyes along the longer length. This focus can help quieten your mind.



Top tip: practice these techniques when you are feeling calm and not at the peak of your anxiety, so that you become more familiar with them. They are a tool that you can use when you are worrying and when you feel anxious, but can be more helpful if you have practiced the technique a few times when calm.

Relaxation Technique #2: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a method that teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process. It can help reduce overall tension and stress levels and help you relax when you are feeling anxious. It can also help reduce physical problems such as stomach aches and headaches as well as improve your sleep.

People with anxiety difficulties are often so tense throughout the day that they are unable to recognise what being relaxed feels like. PMR teaches you to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. You can then begin to 'cue' this relaxed state at the first sign of muscle tension that comes with anxiety.

When doing this exercise, be careful and if you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones or any other medical conditions that hinder physical activity, consult your GP first. Only tense yourself so that it's comfortable, never so that it hurts.



Wear comfortable clothing and remove your shoes if you can. Find a comfortable place to sit, then close your eyes, and let your body 'go loose'



Take five slow, deep breaths



Apply muscle tension to a specific part of your body, your left hand for example



Take a slow deep breath and squeeze the muscles of that body part as hard as you can for about 5 seconds



Then let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles, exhale as you do this. Feel the muscles in that part become loose and limp as the tension flows out



Stay in the relaxed state for about 15 seconds



Make sure you deliberately notice the difference between these two states



Repeat step one, then step two, with each muscle group (hands, arms, shoulders, neck, mouth, eyes, forehead, chest, stomach, buttocks, legs, and feet)

Relaxation Technique #3: 'Safe Place' Imagery

All visualisations can be strengthened by ensuring you engage all your senses in building the picture in your mind's eye - it's more than just 'seeing'!

If you notice any negative links or images entering your positive imagery, then discard that image and think of something else. Avoid using your home (or bed) as a 'safe place'. You can create a new 'safe place' in your imagination.



Start by getting comfortable in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, close your eyes, become aware of any tension in your body, and let go of that tension with each out-breath



Imagine a place where you can feel calm, peaceful and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamed of going to, somewhere you've seen in a picture or just a peaceful place you can create in your mind's eye



Look around you in that place, notice the colours and shapes. What else do you notice?



Now notice the sounds that are around you or perhaps the silence. Notice sounds that are far away and those nearer to you. Those that are more noticeable and those that are more subtle



Think about any smells you notice there



Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you or whatever is supporting you in that place, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch



Notice the pleasant physical sensations in your body whilst you enjoy this safe place



Now whilst you're in your peaceful and safe place, you might choose to give it a name, whether one word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need to



You can choose to linger there a while, just enjoying the peacefulness and serenity. You can leave whenever you want to, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now, bringing yourself back to alertness in the 'here and now'

Relaxation Technique #4: Guided Imagery

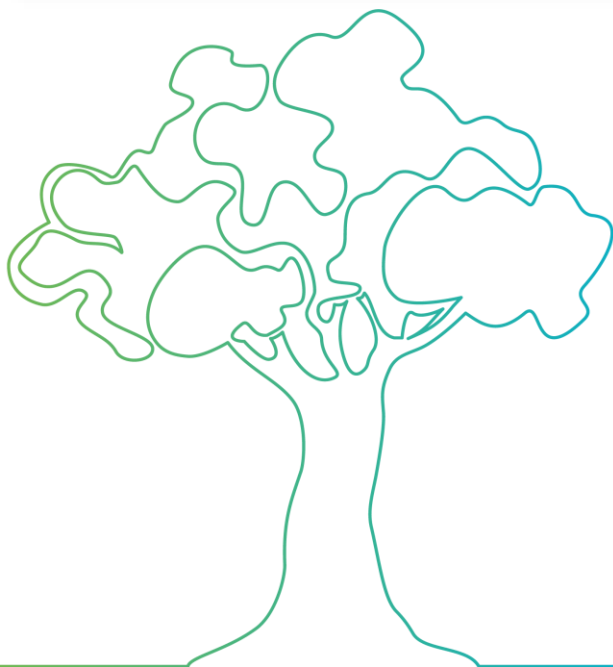
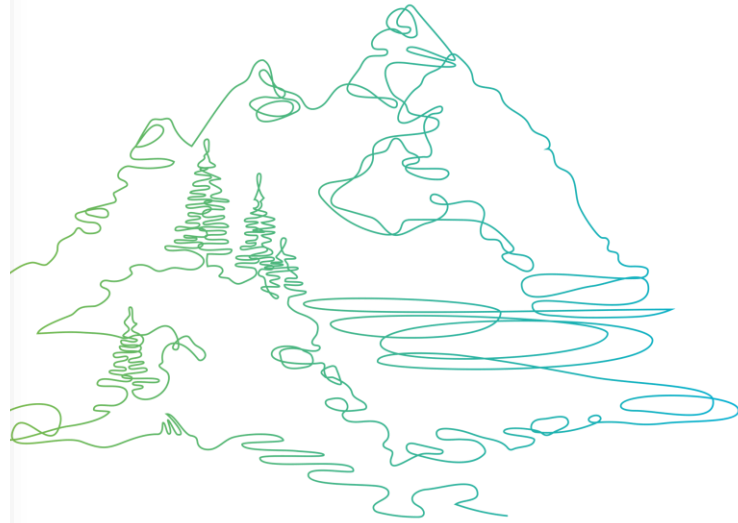
Take slow, deep breaths.

Where is your body the most relaxed? Notice how this area feels. Notice how the relaxation feels. See how you can let this relaxed feeling increase... growing... relaxing... feeling your whole body relax... as if your muscles are melting... softening... relaxing.

As your body relaxes more and more, you can also relax your mind as you focus on the guided imagery to follow.

Imagine that you are outdoors at dusk. It is still light, but the sun has set below the horizon.

It is a pleasant temperature, comfortable... and you are in a safe, peaceful place in the country. Maybe you are on a farm or in the mountains or in the open prairie... picture a place that feels calm, safe and serene... a place you would enjoy watching the starry sky at night.



Imagine the details of your surroundings. You are probably sitting in a chair or lying on a blanket. Your position allows you to admire the sky above.

See the grass on the ground around you. You might see some trees or rocks... or even just wide-open plains. Imagine this pleasant scene and feel yourself relaxing, simply enjoying this solitude.

The sky is becoming gradually darker. The highest part of the sky is a deep indigo colour, becoming darker and darker as the moments pass. This colour blends into a lighter shade, almost green... At the horizon, the sky is an interesting shade of pink, mixed with grey in the fading light.

Relaxation Technique #4: Guided Imagery

The air is slightly cooler now, very pleasantly cool against your forehead and cheeks.

Looking at the horizon now, shapes such as distant trees or buildings are in silhouette. Your eyes are slowly adjusting to the decreasing light. As you gaze up at the sky above, it stretches from horizon to horizon like a vast dome. Straight up above, the sky is growing darker and is nearly black... fading to a lighter colour near the horizon in the west.

You can see the first stars appear... first one star... and then another... and another... See them twinkle... shining like tiny diamonds.

As you look at the darkening sky, you can see more and more stars.

Relax and enjoy the dusk... watching night begin.



The sky is even darker now. It has become a dark black, with only a slight hint of light at the horizon where the sun has set. The sky is so clear... you see no clouds anywhere to obscure the starry sky.

More stars have appeared, until now the sky looks like it has been sprinkled by a saltshaker full of gleaming crystals of salt that are the stars. Some stars are bright, luminous... others are tiny specs that you can barely see.

Simply enjoy relaxing under the starry sky... enjoying this quiet retreat.

Now the sky is jet black. Out here, away from city lights, the stars are amazingly bright. Have you ever seen so many stars? The sky is filled with so many stars, you would not even be able to count them.



Relaxation Technique #4: Guided Imagery

Admire the starry sky... feeling very calm... relaxed... at peace...

When you are ready to leave your imagined peaceful place, you can begin to reawaken your body and mind.

Feel your muscles reawakening as you take note of your surroundings.

Slowly return to the present.

Move your muscles by wiggling your fingers... now open and close your hands a few times.

Wiggle your toes... move your ankles...

Move your arms and legs...

Stretch if you want to... feeling your body becoming fully awake.

Take a moment to sit quietly as you reawaken completely. Notice that you still feel calm and relaxed, though you are awake and alert.

When your mind and body are fully awake, you can resume your usual activities, feeling refreshed.

