

## **WAYS INTO RELAXATION**

*(Living Well Workshop: Managing Anxiety and Panic Attacks notes by Anne Crump edited Mar 2014)*

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety is part of life. A little bit of anxiety can help us perform well at tasks and can bring about a heightened alertness that can be useful in situations where we might need to take care of ourselves. Too much anxiety can at other times overwhelm us and interfere with our daily lives.

Anxiety affects the whole of you. Physiological reactions in the body include dry mouth, tension, sweating, feeling sick. Behavioural effects include finding it hard to express yourself, or to deal with everyday situations. Psychological impacts might include thinking over and over something, or imagining the worst.

Learning how to relax is very much part of finding a way to cope with anxiety. Some activities can help you unwind, such as soaking in the bath, listening to music etc. What makes the difference in dealing with anxiety is regular practice of deep relaxation. Deep relaxation helps lower your heart rate, your breathing and blood pressure. It also reduces the tension in your muscles and metabolic rate and oxygen consumption.

Some of the most common ways of achieving relaxation are:

- Abdominal and calming breathing techniques
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualising a peaceful scene

Other activities that are particularly helpful are meditation and yoga.

### **Abdominal and calming breathing techniques**

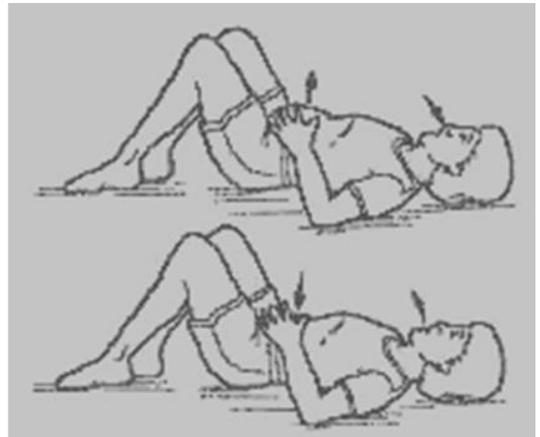
When we get tense, anxious or panicky our breathing usually becomes shallow and faster, occurring in the upper chest. This can also lead to hyperventilation.

Hyperventilation is when you start to breathe very quickly. This upsets the balance of carbon dioxide relative to the amount of oxygen carried in your bloodstream. Shallow, rapid breathing can lead to hyperventilation which can cause physical symptoms similar to those associated with panic attacks (dizziness, feeling jittery, heart pumping faster, lights seem brighter and sounds louder).

Learning how to breathe abdominally and use of calming breathing techniques can help you relax, any time you are feeling anxious or panicky.

## How to practice abdominal breathing:

- Place one hand on your stomach underneath your rib cage
- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose into the bottom of your lungs. Your chest should move only slightly, while your stomach rises, pushing your hand up.
- When you've breathed in fully, pause for a moment and then breathe out fully through your mouth.
- In order to fully relax, take 10 abdominal breaths. Keep your breathing smooth and regular throughout. Remember to pause briefly before breathing out.



## Calming Breathing Exercise

The other way to calm down your breathing is to slow your breathing down so that your 'out breath' is longer than your 'in breath'. Practise this calming breathing technique:

- Breathe in to a count of four
- Pause
- Breathe out to a count of six
- Repeat until your breathing feels under control again

Practice daily when you feel okay as this helps develop confidence in being able to calm and slow your breathing down when you need to.

*(If you start to feel light-headed while practicing breathing exercises, stop for 15 – 20 seconds, and then start again. Stop altogether if you are unsure in any way and seek advice.)*

## Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves moving through the body systematically, tensing and relaxing, one after the other the different muscle groups. The idea is to tense each muscle for about 5 seconds, and then to let go of that tension. Then you give yourself about 10 seconds of relaxation, and notice how the muscle feels when it is relaxed in contrast to how it felt when it was tensed.

If you are unable to actively tense/tighten muscle groups because of injury or other health issues, then think about the different muscle groups or parts of your body, noticing any tension and then focus on relaxing those areas.

## Visualising a peaceful scene

Visualising or imagining yourself in a peaceful scene can help give a general sense of relaxation and help with anxious thoughts. The peaceful scene could be a warm beach, a calm lake, woodland, in front of a log fire, etc. The important part is to visualise the scene in detail using all your senses so that it completely absorbs your attention.

- Lie down, or sit in a very comfortable chair somewhere quiet. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to help you relax. Now, imagine you have all the time in the world. You are feeling calm and safe.
- Imagine your own peaceful scene. Describe it in lots of detail appealing to all of your senses: sight, sound, smell and touch. Where are you, what does the scene look like. Notice the colours, sounds that surround you. What is the temperature? What smells are around? Write down your peaceful scene, you could also record it for yourself.
- At the end take some deep breaths and stretch and relax. Remember, you can return to this special place anytime.

Once you have imagined a peaceful scene you can practice returning to it when deep breathing or relaxing. This helps reinforce it in your mind and then you can return to it at any time when you want to stop anxious thoughts and calm yourself down.

## Practice

Practice really helps in learning how to relax. Ideally it is good to spend 5 minutes a day on abdominal or calming breathing exercises, and 20/30minutes each day on another relaxation technique such as visualising a peaceful scene.

If you want to practice regularly but are finding it difficult, it can be useful to notice what gets in the way. Sometimes it can help to build in short times (5-10 mins) of relaxation into your daily routine.

There are many relaxation CD's you can buy or borrow from the library - check out which ones sound good to you. The Somerville Foundation has a CD of calming breathing and relaxation exercises that can be posted out to you. Contact Anne Crump if you would like one.

Some people find that music helps them to relax, why not collect together the pieces that help you to relax, unwind and de-stress.

## Other things that might be helpful:

- *Avoid stimulants* such as caffeine, nicotine, amphetamines etc. Their effect can set off feelings similar to having a panic attack. They can also aggravate heart rhythm disturbances.
- *Exercise* (the amount/type that's appropriate for your particular heart condition) encourages the release of the body's own 'feel good' chemicals. Sometimes if you are feeling agitated or stressed or finding it hard to relax it can be helpful to do something physically active to disperse that energy.
- *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy* - a short-term talking treatment. It aims to make connections between the patterns of thinking, feelings and behaviour that are behind difficulties, and so help change how we respond.
- *Counselling* - provides a regular time and space for people to talk about their troubles and explore difficult feelings, in a confidential setting.
- *Mindfulness* - combines meditation, breathing techniques and paying attention to the present moment.
- *Meditation, Yoga, Tai Chi*

## References and resources:

### Books:

*The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edmund J Bourne PhD

*The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* by Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman and Matthew McKay

### Helpline:

*Anxiety UK* run a helpline + website: Helpline 08444 775 774 / [anxietyuk.org.uk/](http://anxietyuk.org.uk/)

### Listen to relaxation and breathing exercises online:

*The Mental Health Foundation*: their Wellbeing Podcasts are free downloads to help you relax and improve your sense of wellbeing. Topics include, stress and relaxation, wellbeing and positive thinking, help with sleep and overcoming fear and anxiety.  
<http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/help-information/podcasts/>

*The Mood Café*: has lots of information plus you can listen to breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation exercises on their website.

<http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/download-relaxation-exercises.aspx>

### Mobile App:

Developed by the research team at UWE Bristol to help manage anxiety.

<http://sam-app.org.uk/>

Please contact me if you have any further queries on relaxation techniques or any other emotional or mental health issues.

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