

The Mind guide to relaxation



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Learning how to relax improves day-to-day living, and can be a valuable tool for coping with stress of any kind. This booklet explores why people have problems trying to relax and how to resolve them. It explains how to introduce more relaxation into your everyday life, and how to take it further. It is not designed to go into specific deep relaxation techniques.

What's the link between stress and relaxation?

We all experience stress in our daily lives, although the causes and the way we respond to them will be different for everybody. Stress can either relate to physical, mental or emotional pressures, but all three trigger the same ancient response called 'fight or flight'. This response is linked to the body's nervous system and is there to protect us in life-threatening situations. Our prehistoric ancestors, living in a cruel and harsh environment, needed to be able to protect their young, fight for food or escape from the threat presented by other hostile people or animals. The moment they were presented with actual physical danger, an alarm system in the brain activated the systems required to produce energy and gear up the body for high levels of physical activity. The energy enabled them to fight or flee from the threat; afterwards the body returned to a state of relaxation.

This response is still wholly appropriate whenever an actual threat to life exists. However, nowadays our fears are more likely to spring from memories, imagination, and conscience or moral belief rather from the outside world. Nevertheless, the body still interprets these fears as threats requiring fight or flight. A whole battery of physical reactions then occur when they are not needed, which will create uncomfortable and unpleasant feelings, as well as wasting large amounts of energy unnecessarily.

In our modern day lives, this may happen again and again as we battle with commuter travel, supermarket queues or difficult social situations. The way we react to these eventually becomes a habit that, repeated again and again, becomes draining and exhausting. Furthermore, if we react to stressful situations with angry outbursts, we quadruple the exhaustion process. Many people know about the tiredness associated with stress.

What's wrong with the way I relax now?

We all look for ways to counter 'fight or flight' on a regular basis. Without necessarily being aware of it, we try to escape from the unpleasant feelings of stress and find some relaxation by going to the pub or to the gym session, or flaking out in front of the TV. Drinking, smoking or taking other drugs can also seem to offer an answer. But they are either toxic or damaging and often act as stimulants rather than relaxants. People become increasingly immune to their effects, and require more and more of them to get the same effect.

A better approach is to follow the old adage, 'A change is as good as a rest'. We can successfully find relief from stress through a change of activity. People who have tough, physical jobs often find relaxation in developing a mentally stimulating hobby. Those who have a mentally taxing job will often take up hobbies like walking or swimming.

But, if hobbies or extra-curricular activities, including exercise, become excessive, and make people feel even more driven or pressurised, they then cease to be a means of relaxation. If someone is already exhausted and tired out in daily life (as so many are) trying to relax by doing even more is not the answer. The fact is that people often confuse relaxation with recreation.

So what is relaxation, as opposed to recreation?

Relaxation is about using only as much energy as you need to complete any task – whether physical, mental or emotional – and then recovering as quickly as possible afterwards. The first task is to become more relaxed in daily life and not to waste energy on things that don't require it. The second is to learn to use deep relaxation in the way you would use a full stop in punctuation – allowing you to pause.

It's helpful to think about the way we drive a car. The accelerator adjusts the energy from the engine; the gearbox helps us to use the power more efficiently in relation to speed. There's constant interaction between the two, which keeps fuel consumption down, increases efficiency and prevents the vehicle from becoming overheated and burnt out. The car may stop at traffic lights or gently cruise through the countryside, and this balances the high-energy motorway driving and overtaking. Between outings, the car can be switched off.

People meet the challenges and pressures of life on a daily basis, but seldom think about how they're doing it. To continue the car theme, you're unlikely to be adjusting your energy output and watching what gear you're in. You're probably driving hard in the wrong gear, over-revving the engine and overheating your system.

The key here is achieving balance. For people who are rushing to keep up at work or at home, what's needed is time to slow down and let the body recover. Those who are stressed because they don't have enough to occupy or stimulate them may need to increase their activity level to bring about a balance. While anyone overburdened with demands that cause them a lot of hassle, without bringing any reward, should think about a shift in personal priorities.

I feel too tense to relax. What can I do?

Putting on the brakes

Stress often builds up during the course of the day, which is why people who are anxious feel worse at night. Often this leads to a disturbed night's sleep, leading to higher levels of anxiety the next morning. By deliberately pausing for a moment every now and then during the course of the day, it's possible to stop the feelings rising. The end result of this is often a better night's sleep because the part of the nervous system that controls the 'braking' or slowing down of the body is helped by relaxation.

Going back to the car, you wouldn't attempt to slow a car down with the brake while your foot was still on the accelerator. Once moving fast, even after you have taken your foot off the accelerator, you can't stop instantly – the momentum continues to propel the car forward. When people have been going flat out, it takes time for the effects of stress to wear off and for them to start feeling more relaxed – don't expect too much too quickly.

Adrenalin addiction

If you are used to a hectic lifestyle, relaxing can feel alien. You can be addicted to the effects of adrenalin (a hormone involved in 'fight or flight') and have problems giving this up. The difficulty is that the body can't remain on red alert all the time. Eventually people will become exhausted or may suffer physical ill health that forces them to review their stress levels. Feeling stressed isn't pleasant – but, in time, you will discover that the feelings associated with relaxation are pleasurable.

So, how can I introduce more relaxation into my everyday life?

The first thing is to avoid putting more pressure on yourself in the attempt to relax. It's an apparent contradiction that the harder you try to get to sleep, the more difficult it becomes, and relaxing is just the same. Both are influenced by the same part of the nervous system.

'Infilling' moments

It's a good idea to start by introducing brief pauses during the day, for example, while waiting for the kettle to boil, after putting the telephone down, at traffic lights or waiting for a bus or train. These 'infilling moments' are opportunities to take your foot off the accelerator and put your mind into neutral.

Little red sticky dots are a great help as a reminder to change old habits. Place these in areas where you can remember to infill – on your computer, telephone or even on the back of the toilet door! Don't turn infilling into a worry, but try to do it as many times as you remember during the day.

Everyday relaxation

- When 'infilling', just stop, let your shoulders drop and gently sigh your breath out through your mouth and pause momentarily.
- When you put the telephone down or come off a word processor, drop your hands by your side and gently stretch your fingers and thumbs out. Stop making the effort and gently do a 'swimmer's shake'. If you feel sensations of heaviness, warmth, tingling or indeed lightness, these are all associated with relaxation and mean that you are getting a result.
- Whenever you are out and about, just learn to slow down by a tiny amount. Rushing about frantically may achieve little in the long term, except exhaustion. Think your activities through, don't let them just become a haphazard set of events.

- Notice pleasurable things around you, however small.
- Allow yourself moments of distraction, because this can help you to relax. Take a moment to gaze out of the window, for example, and enjoy the view.
- Strike a balance between activity, rest and play – it's essential for healthy relaxation.
- Smiling and laughing produce endorphins, which again will help you feel more relaxed.
- Remember, life should never be such hard work that you lose sight of lighter moments.

As a rule, the trick to relaxation is to continue 'giving it a go'. Try not to worry about the outcome. If you find things are not happening – then let go and move on. The best time to learn any relaxation skill is probably going to be when you are feeling less stressed, not in the middle of a crisis.

How can I take relaxation further?

Once you've introduced small pauses into your life, and the concept is more familiar, you can build in longer and deeper relaxations. Until you understand what the feelings associated with relaxation are, it's difficult to know what to expect anyway. Like any skill, deep relaxation is best learned from an experienced relaxation teacher, or failing this, a good-quality relaxation tape. It's important to recognise that learning how to do it takes practise and commitment. There are three parts to relaxation: preparation, relaxation method and recovery. If you leave any of these out, your relaxation is unlikely to achieve maximum benefit:

- Preparation means investing in time for relaxation, and then choosing a suitable position (see p. 9 for some examples) and making sure you are warm and comfortable.

- Good-quality relaxation methods should follow a logical sequence, with good reason. It's therefore likely to be more effective if you stick to the suggested order.
- Recovery is covered in detail on p.10.

Regular practice

You need to have deep relaxation practices daily, or even twice a day, at the beginning. When learning any new skill – how to drive a car, ride a bicycle, play an instrument or perform a dance routine – you need to concentrate on each movement at first. With regular practice and repetition, the skills become second nature and you do them automatically. It's the same with learning to be more relaxed in day-to-day living.

- If possible, plan to set aside a specific time for your regular practice. (Once you start appreciating how enjoyable relaxation is, you will look forward to it as a period of peace and pleasure).
- If you can, choose a quiet place to practise relaxation. It's easier to learn if you are not interrupted by loud sounds, the telephone or people coming in. When you become really good at relaxation, you will be able to 'switch off' even in noisy, busy environments.
- It's impossible to relax if you are cold, so make sure you are comfortably warm.
- Avoid practising relaxation when you are hungry or just after eating a meal.
- If you use a tape/CD player or remote, have the handset close by so that you can operate it without difficulty.
- Sometimes young children enjoy relaxing with a parent, doing the exercises and then snuggling up to enjoy the peace and stillness.

Don't worry about whether you're doing everything correctly. Never try, just *do*! And enjoy the feeling!

Effective positions for relaxation

- Ensure table is close and arms are not stretched out
- Alternatively, kneel beside a bed



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- Support under head, neck and knees
- Head should be level, not tilted back or pushed forward

- Knees high enough to reduce tension in tummy
- Legs on chair sideways
- Support right up to behind knees
- Good for relieving lower backache



- 'Old' recovery position
- Support under head and knees
- Good if pregnant

- Support under pelvis
- Good if overweight or with large/ heavy bust



- Back fully supported by chair
- Chin and thighs parallel to the floor
- Feet and hands resting easily

What's so important about relaxation positions?

The body consists of 640 involuntary muscles that hold us together and pull us around on a daily basis. Whenever we need to move, muscles contract and pull against the bones to which they are attached. Muscles work in pairs and work in opposing directions. As one muscle contracts, pulling against a joint in one direction, the opposing muscle has to stretch to allow that movement to occur. In between the state of contraction and stretching there is what is known as the 'position of ease', for example, when your arm is hanging loosely by your side. It is this position that we use for effective, deeper relaxation. The positions demonstrated on the previous page are designed with this in mind. Your muscles cannot relax if they are in a taut or contracted position. You can always test for a relaxed muscle by gently squeezing it with your hand. A relaxed muscle feels soft, whereas a contracted muscle is firmer.

What do I need to do after a relaxation?

Because all your body rhythms will have slowed down, avoid jumping up quickly as you may become dizzy. Always stretch – yawn – wriggle and have a lazy look around you. Say to yourself, 'I will keep this feeling of calm/peace/serenity/tranquillity for as long as I can'. Then move, speak and breathe a little more gently than usual.

Relaxation leaves muscles softened, and it's important to be gentle when bringing them back into action. Remove any cushions that are giving you support. If lying down, don't pull yourself up using your abdominal muscles, but roll on to your side and push yourself into a sitting position using your arms. Then, slowly get on to your knees and then stand up.

What about breathing exercises?

A lot of people become tense or upset with trying to engage in complicated breathing exercises so often related to relaxation and medication. Clearly, this can be counter-productive. We breathe automatically, so there's no need to be conscious of the way you breathe in, but breathing out is associated with relaxation, and it's helpful if you can try to slow down the rate of your out-breath gently.

Some relaxation involves movement and is therefore active; some involves just a state of 'being' and is therefore passive. The active types of relaxation are far more effective to start with. As you become more experienced in the feeling of relaxation, you can move on to those that are passive. In this situation, you may be taught more about what breathing has to do with relaxation.

For some people, learning special breathing techniques (with a teacher or a cassette tape) has been a good strategy for helping them to cope better with moments of crisis.

There's no reason to get worried about the way you breathe, however; as you start to relax, your breathing rate will slow down automatically.

What if relaxation doesn't work for me?

If you have tried relaxation and find you get no results, it's likely to be for a limited set of reasons:

- You are trying too hard and in pressurising yourself you are losing the opportunity to relax.
- There are many different methods of relaxation and you haven't found one that suits you yet.
- You are so 'uptight' or in crisis, that letting go, even for a little bit, is impossible for you at the moment.

- You haven't been through the three stages of relaxation in full.
- You are taking up a poor position for relaxation (see p. 9).
- You are experiencing physiological discomfort, e.g. hunger.
- You are stuck with an old idea about how relaxation works, which is preventing you from moving forward.
- You aren't sufficiently engaged during practice – just listening to a teacher or tape will have no benefit in itself.

Sometimes, people let their lives slip into chaos to mask underlying problems they are not facing or dealing with. The only person who can decide this is you – and if this is the case, seek help to free yourself from this trap. It may be a good idea to consider talking things through with a professional (see *How to Find Out More* on p. 13 and Mind's booklet *Understanding Talking Treatments*, details under *Further Reading* on p. 14). Once you've begun to tackle your problems, you will then be more able to relax.

Is relaxation always helpful?

If you are under extreme pressure, especially if it's been for some time, you may feel as if everything is getting out of control and you might be going mad. This is a very common feeling and one you need not be afraid of. Once you start to relax, you will probably feel more in control – not less. Things will start to resolve themselves. If you reduce physical tension through relaxation, mental turmoil does quieten down.

However, relaxation is not appropriate for everyone. It can make some people feel worse if external stimuli are removed. Similarly, others may find withdrawing into a quiet and peaceful environment adds to their problem. If you start any relaxation technique and feel uncomfortable or disturbed, do not continue.

How to find out more

The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

1 Regent Place
Rugby
Warwickshire CV21 2PJ
tel. 0870 443 5252
fax: 0870 443 5160
e-mail: bacp@bacp.co.uk
web: www.counselling.co.uk
Send an A5 SAE for details of practitioners in your area

First Steps to Freedom

7 Avon Court
School Lane
Kenilworth
Warwickshire CV8 2GX
tel./fax: 01926 864473
e-mail: info@firststeps.demon.co.uk
web: www.firststeps.demon.co.uk
Offer relaxation tapes

Directory of Chartered Psychologists

web: www.bps.org.uk
A list of psychologists, who may offer relaxation techniques

British Autogenic Society

Royal London Homeopathic Hospital
Great Ormond Street
London WC1N 3HR
tel./fax: 020 7713 6336
web: www.autogenic-therapy.org.uk

Further reading

- A-Z of Complementary and Alternative Therapies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- The BMA Family Doctor Guide to Stress* (Dorling Kindersley 1999) £4.99
- Complementary Therapies in Context: The psychology of healing*
H. Graham (JKP 1999) £16.95
- The Encyclopedia of Energy Healing* A. Baggot (Godsfield Press 1999) £17.99
- Getting the Best from your Counsellor or Psychotherapist* (Mind 1995) £1
- Homeopathy: An introductory guide to natural medicine for the whole person* P. Adams (Element 1999) £3
- How to Cope with Panic Attacks* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Cope with Sleep Problems* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Look After Yourself* (Mind 2000) £1
- How to Stop Worrying* (Mind 2000) £1
- Learn to Meditate* D. Fontana (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.95
- Learn to Relax* M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £10.99
- Learn to Relax* (tape) M. George (Duncan Baird 2000) £3.99
- Making Sense of Herbal Remedies* (Mind 2000) £3.50
- Making Sense of Traditional Chinese Medicine* (Mind 2001) £3.50
- Massage: An introductory guide to the healing power of touch*
S. Mitchell (Element 1999) £5.99
- Meditation: An introductory guide to relaxation for mind and body*
D. Fontana (Element 1999) £5.99
- The Mind Guide to Food and Mood* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Managing Stress* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Physical Activity* (Mind 2001) £1
- The Mind Guide to Surviving Working Life* (Mind 2000) £1
- The Mind Guide to Yoga* (Mind 2001) £1
- Staying Sane* Dr R. Persaud (Metro Books 1998) £12.99
- Understanding Anxiety* (Mind 2000) £1
- Understanding Depression* (Mind 2001) £1
- Understanding Talking Treatments* (Mind 2000) £1

Mind works for a better life for everyone with experience of mental distress

Mind does this by:

- advancing the views, needs and ambitions of people with experience of mental distress
- promoting inclusion through challenging discrimination
- influencing policy through campaigning and education
- inspiring the development of quality services which reflect expressed need and diversity
- achieving equal civil and legal rights through campaigning and education

The values and principles which underpin Mind's work are:
autonomy, equality, knowledge, participation and respect

For details of your nearest Mind association and of local services contact Mind's helpline, *MindinfoLine*: 0845 7660 163 Mon, Weds, Thurs 9.15am – 4.45pm.

For interpretation, *MindinfoLine* has access to 100 languages via Language Line. Typetalk is available for people with hearing or speech problems who have access to a minicom. To make a call via Typetalk dial 0800 959598, fax: 0151 709 8119.

Scottish Association for Mental Health tel. 0141 568 7000

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health tel. 02890 328474



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