COMBAT STRESS THROUGH RELAXATION

CREATING A FRIENDLY, POSITIVE, INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT
One of the best ways to combat the symptoms of stress is through relaxation. Unfortunately, when you feel particularly stressed or ‘wound up’ you will probably find it is difficult to relax. Give yourself time to relax regularly and you will find it easier to consciously relax when you begin to feel tense. In addition, regular practice of relaxation will help you to prevent high levels of tension from developing.

There are many different methods of inducing the relaxation response. Meditation, which originated in the East thousands of years ago, has been adopted by an increasing number of Westerners as a way of coping with the stress of daily life. More recently, Western methods have developed, such as Progressive Muscle Relaxation and Autogenics. In addition to these methods, which involve setting aside time to practice, there are techniques which can be used ‘on the spot’ to quickly reduce feelings of tension as they arise.

**Benefits of Relaxation**

The use of relaxation techniques offer a number of benefits to those who work or live in a potentially stressful situation, including:

- Helping the person to establish some degree of personal control over their feelings and actions.
- Improving the clarity of thinking during times of crisis, when making correct decisions is important.
- Helping the person to project a calmer image, which can help diffuse emotionally fraught situations.
- Reduces the likelihood of the person exacerbating a situation by becoming emotionally upset themselves.
- An improved sense of wellbeing for the person.

**Methods of relaxation**

Three types of method will be outlined:

1. **Deep relaxation**
   - Practise sitting or lying down, ideally daily for 15 to 20 minutes. This has both short and long term effects and is designed to calm both mental and physical processes. Particular techniques include Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Autogenics, the use of visualisation, and self hypnosis.

2. **Relaxation during daily activity**
   - This involves tension recognition and loosening, and is important in reducing tension which can build up throughout the day.

3. **Emergency relaxation**
   - This involves techniques to reduce over arousal and panic in the heat of the moment, during a crisis situation.

**1. Deep relaxation**

As with any skill, practice is needed for your body to learn how to relax deeply. Once learned, it can be used almost anywhere, such as at work during a quiet moment, on a bus or a train (but not when driving a car). However, to begin with, you need to put some time aside, preferably each day, to practise undisturbed. You may find you can achieve a great sense of relaxation very quickly. It may take a few weeks, but persevere.

**Preparation**

1. Before beginning the exercise, arrange a place to practise that is quiet, warm and comfortable, for a period of time where you can remain undisturbed. This may involve putting your phone on silent, explaining to your partner what you are doing, or shutting the dog out of the room.
2. Make yourself comfortable. Either lie down, or sit in a comfortable, supporting chair. Loosen any tight clothing and take off your shoes. Do not cross your legs or fold your arms. Close your eyes.
3. Follow the exercise given below or another suitable exercise. If you have difficulty in remembering at first, you might like to ask someone to go through the exercise with you, or to use a tape recording of the instructions. There are also many good audiotapes available commercially.

**Progressive relaxation**

These progressive relaxation exercises will enable your body to get the feel of tension and relaxation.

For each set of muscles, notice how they are feeling for a few seconds, then tense them for a few seconds only, then allow them to relax, and notice the difference between tensing and relaxing.

**Exercise 1: To help cut down on distraction, close your eyes.**

- Clench both fists and feel the tension in your hands and forearms, now relax.
- Pull both hands upwards to touch your shoulders and tense your upper arm, now relax.
- Straighten your arms tightly by your side and feel the sensation, almost of pain, now relax and leave your arms resting by your sides.

**Exercise 2: Consider the sensation of touch where your head and shoulders are resting.**

1. Shrug your shoulders and feel the tension, now relax.
2. Gently press your head back and notice how tension arises between the shoulder blades and upwards into your neck. This type of tension may happen frequently during your daily activity, leading to headaches or pain in your upper back. Now release the tension and feel that your head is once more resting back gently.
Exercise 3: to push unwanted thoughts away that might be getting in the way of relaxation concentrate on seeing the word ‘calm’ written across your mind each time you now relax a muscle group.
1. Raise your eyebrows and feel the tension in your forehead, now relax and think ‘calm’.
2. Frown and squeeze your eyes shut, now relax, think ‘calm’.
3. Press the tip of your tongue upwards behind your upper teeth, feel the tension developing, now relax.
4. Press your lips together and feel the tension all over your face, now relax and let all of your facial muscles feel calm.

Exercise 4: the final sequence involves large muscle groups which, when relaxing, release lots of inner tension.
1. Breathe in deeply and hold your breath for a moment. Now breathe out slowly, in a controlled way, and release the tension in your chest. Now relax and continue comfortable breathing.
2. Pull in the abdominal muscles as tightly as possible, now release them and let go of the tension deep inside of you. Think of the word ‘calm’ as you let your muscles relax.
3. Straighten your legs and point your toes downwards, now relax and wriggle your toes slightly to help release the tension.

Once you have gone through the Progressive Relaxation, you can relax yourself further by using visualisation, or the power of your imagination.

Allow yourself to imagine a restful and peaceful image. It might be a place you have been, or a place you would like to be. It may be somewhere you have created for yourself. It may be an image of a flower, a bird, anything you find restful. Imagine whatever it is in as much detail as you can, the sights and sounds and feelings you associate with it. Enjoy your relaxation.

Once you have learned how to relax in this way, you will find it is easy to do so in other situations.

You can move on then to using relaxation for shorter, more frequent ‘breaks’ in the day. Five minutes three times a day can help you face the day with more energy and enthusiasm and better able to cope with any stress which may come your way.

2. Daily tension control

This is a simple technique which involves checking your body for signs of tension at times throughout the day. The body is divided into four sections:
1. Feet, legs and pelvis
2. Trunk
3. Arms and hands

You simply check each area in turn, and become aware of any tension present. This is then eased by stretching, or tensing and relaxing, or perhaps massaging. You might also take a couple of deep breaths, breathing out slowly. Some people remind themselves to carry out this ‘spot check’ by having a red spot of sticky paper on their watch, so that when they look at the time they are reminded to check their tension.

3. Emergency relaxation

This can be used during crisis moments, perhaps a conflict at work, at home, or some emergency which requires quick but calm action. The purpose is simply to reduce a high level of arousal enough for the person to continue to cope with the situation.
• Say ‘STOP’ to yourself. This is to break into the situation which might be getting out of control in your mind.
• Breathe in deeply, and breathe out slowly, dropping your shoulders and relaxing your hands as you do so. Breathe in deeply again and once more extend the out breath, relaxing your face, mouth and jaw as you do so.
• Continue at a slower, more controlled pace, and if you need to, repeat the process later.