Relaxation techniques

1. PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

What is it?

A sequence where you tighten and relax the muscles in the body to increase relaxation by reducing tension in the body. The sequence can be long (working slowly through all muscles in the body) or short (working quickly through large muscles groups).

When would you use it?

The longer sequence can be used as an ongoing strategy to maintain relaxation and the shorter sequence can be used before going into stressful situations (sitting for an exam; playing sport).

What do you need to do it?

You don't need any equipment; all you need to do is have a chair to sit on (or an area to lie down).

A CD of relaxation music (OPTIONAL).

Technique

Short Sequence

- Loosen any tight clothing and sit comfortably with your hands resting on your thighs (or lie on the floor with a pillow under the head).
- Keep your eyes closed while you tense different muscles of your body as much as you can and then when you relax them let your muscles return to the resting state immediately. Do not tense so hard that physical discomfort occurs.
- Focus all your attention on the sensation coming from your muscles.
- You will hold each muscle tension for a count of 10. When you release the tension, allow the muscle to relax completely and immediately and let the feeling of relaxation flow through the body.
- Breathe slowly and deeply.
- Tighten the muscles in your toes and feet. Hold for a count of 10. Relax and enjoy the sensation of release from tension.
• Move up through the body, tightening each group of muscles, holding for 10, then relaxing: legs, stomach, back, neck, face.

• Now tense every muscle in your body and feel the tension in every part of your body. Hold. Let your whole body relax. Scan the body for any remaining tension and relax that part of the body. Feel a wave of calmness as you stop tensing.

• Continue to breathe slowly and deeply.

Long Sequence

Loosen any tight clothing and sit comfortably with your hands resting on your thighs (or lie on the floor with a pillow under the head). Keep your eyes closed while you tense different muscles of your body as much as you can and then when you relax them let your muscles return to the resting state immediately. Do not tense so hard that physical discomfort occurs. Focus all your attention on the sensation coming from your muscles. Try to tighten only the intended muscle while the rest of the body stays quiet and relaxed. You will hold each muscle tension for a count of 10. When you release the tension, allow the muscle to relax completely and immediately and let the feeling of relaxation flow through the body. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply.

Legs

• Flex the muscles of your left leg by raising it 15-25 cm above the floor. Turn your toes slightly back toward your head. Hold this position of tension for a count of 10, until you begin to feel the muscles start to tremble. Then, say to yourself: “Let go and relax” and immediately let your leg return to the floor and relax. Let the leg rest while feeling any tension flowing out of the leg. Say to yourself “I feel the tension flowing out of my leg ... My leg feels relaxed, warm, heavy ... completely relaxed”.

• Run through the entire procedure again for your right leg.

Buttocks and Thighs

• Tighten your buttock and thigh muscles, as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10. Then release them, saying “Let go” to yourself. Focus your attention on the relaxed feeling in those muscles, on the tension flowing out.

Stomach

• Tighten your abdominal muscles. Hold. Let the muscles go and relax.
Back and Neck
- Arch your spine, tightening all along it from your tailbone to your neck. Hold. Let go and relax.

Arms and Shoulders
- Imagine there is a bar suspended above you that you want to use to pull yourself up. Raise your hands, palms upward, above your chest. Grab the imaginary bar and clench your fists around it as hard as you can. Flex the muscles in your arms and shoulders. Hunch your shoulders up as tightly as you can. Hold. Let go. Relax and note the warm, relaxed feelings, letting the tension flow out.

Jaw
- Tighten your jaw muscles, clamping down on your back teeth. Hold. Let go and relax.

Face
- Tighten your facial muscles by wrinkling your forehead and closing your eyes tightly. Hold. Let go. Rest and focus on the relaxed feeling.

Entire body
- Clench your feet and fists. Pull your shoulders up. Tighten your jaw and face. Now simultaneously flex your entire body, arching yourself as much as you can from your heels to the back of your head. Hold. Release and just let yourself go ... all the way, as much as you can.
- Relax there and feel the tension drain away.

Get totally relaxed
- Close your eyes. Let your attention wander slowly over each part of your body, from legs to face, as you did in the exercise. If any area seems to have some tension left, just let it go: Feel the tension draining out of you, but don't worry if there is still a little left. Keeping your eyes closed, stay in this relaxed state for the rest of the session. Tell yourself: "I am relaxed now ... My legs feel relaxed ... My buttocks, thighs, and abdomen feel relaxed ... My back, arms, shoulders, jaws, face and eyes feel relaxed ... The tension has been let go."
2. IMAGERY RELAXATION

What is it?
A technique where you imagine a scene, place, or situation that you regard as safe, peaceful, restful, and happy.

When would you use it?
The technique can be used before going into stressful situations or as an ongoing strategy to maintain a relaxed state. It can also be used to rehearse mentally before a big event or a difficult situation.

What do you need to do it?
You don’t need any equipment; all you need is somewhere quiet to practise in.

A CD of relaxation music (OPTIONAL).

Technique
Read through the following script through first and, once you know what you have to do, start by sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and imagining your scene.

Imagery script
Select an image that is calming and restful for you. Your scene may be at the beach, in a rainforest, on a boat, in the snow or anywhere else that you choose. In your scene, try hard to imagine that you are really there and concentrate hard on your senses (what you can see, hear, smell, touch, or taste). For example, you may imagine sounds of running water and birds, the smell of cut grass, the taste of a cool drink, the feel of a mossy rock, or the warmth of the sun.

Now sit comfortably with your arms resting on your thighs or by your side. Breathe slowly and gently in through your nose. Close your eyes. Now imagine your scene and take a moment to look around you. What can you see? Now listen carefully. What can you hear in your scene? Now you might want to touch some of the things in your scene – it might be the ground, or sand or some water or something else. Note the feeling of the textures on your skin. You feel quiet and calm and relaxed. Now spend a moment to smell your surroundings. Can you identify any smells? All the time you are doing this you are feeling completely relaxed and safe and peaceful. Finally check if you can taste anything from your scene. Is there the tang of the ocean or the taste of cool fresh water? As you relax in your scene your body is heavy and relaxed and all of the tension is leaving your body. Your breathing is very slow and rhythmic. Your entire body feels comfortable and calm.
To deepen even further your feelings of relaxation you can say the following things to yourself: “I feel calm and relaxed. My face feels smoother ... heavier ... and more relaxed. My body is relaxed ... I feel safe and at peace.”

Now take a moment to just enjoy the feeling of relaxation and the peace of this scene. Look around you again to get a really clear image of this scene, your special place. Whenever you are feeling stressed or upset you can regain this feeling of relaxation just by imagining this place and the feelings of relaxation that go with it. When you are ready, open your eyes feeling alert and awake but keeping the feeling of relaxation and calm that you have created.

**Imagery in preparation and rehearsal**

You can also use imagery in rehearsal before a big event, allowing you to run through the event in your mind.

Aside from allowing you to rehearse mentally, imagery also allows you to practise in advance for anything unusual that might occur, so that you are prepared and already practiced in handling it. This is a technique used very commonly by top sports people, who learn good performance habits by repeatedly rehearsing performances in their imagination. Sports people also prepare for the unexpected by rehearsing using mental imagery.

Imagery also allows you to pre-experience achievement of your goals, helping to give you the self-confidence you need to do something well. This is another technique used by successful people.
3. MANDALA

What is it?

A drawing technique designed to calm the mind. Mandala is a Sanskrit term for the whole world or healing circle. Mandala is a representation of the universe and everything in it.

When would you use it?

The technique can be used quickly and easily in many situations. It does not require a quiet place and is very effective if you are not able to do any physical activity or if your mind is racing.

What do you need to do it?

One or more sheets of paper (A4 or larger) with a 15 cm circle drawn in the middle of the page.

One (or several) coloured pencils or pens.

A clear space to work on.

Examples of mandala drawings.

A CD of relaxation music (OPTIONAL).

Technique

Guidelines before you start drawing:

Once you start, keep drawing for 10 minutes.

- Keep the pencil touching the paper unless you are changing colours.
- If you do not know what to draw next, simply colour over an existing part until the idea for the next part forms.
- Take as much time as you like and draw whatever patterns you want to.
- Do not talk to anyone else (if you are working in a group).
Now, let's start.

- Take two deep breaths, exhaling slowly.
- Place your pencil in the centre of the circle and imagine that you are calm and at peace in the world.
- Begin drawing within the circle.
- Draw whatever patterns you like and change colours whenever you like. There is no right or wrong in what you do.
- Stop drawing after 10 minutes.

**Examples of a mandala**

Another way to draw a mandala is to divide the circle into segments and draw patterns or images that relate to that segment. Start in the middle segment (right here, right now) – *this is ME as I might appear right here, and right now as I draw this mandala.*

The other segments are:

- Behind – what has happened before
- Ahead – where you are likely to go if you continue on your current path or direction
- Above – external influences, or spirituality
- Below – your material world (life in the everyday world here below)

You can use the mandala to tell a story about your past, current and future situations.
The mandala circle
4. MEDITATION

What is it?

A technique where you sit quietly with your body relaxed, and focus your concentration on something for a period of time. By meditating, you rest your body, allow stress hormones to subside, and occupy your mind so that unpleasant, stressful thoughts do not intrude.

When would you use it?

The technique can be used regularly to maintain a calm mind and a relaxed state.

What do you need to do it?

You don’t need any equipment; all you need is somewhere quiet to practise in.

Technique

Sit comfortably in a quiet spot. Relax your body. You may wish to close your eyes unless you choose to look at an object. You should spend at least 10 minutes meditating, although you can take as long as you like. Choose one of the following techniques to focus your concentration.

Focus on breathing and counting breaths

- Breathe through your nose.
- Become aware of your breathing.
- As you breathe out (exhale), say the word, “ONE”, silently to yourself. For example: breathe IN…OUT, “ONE”, IN…OUT, “ONE”, etc.
- Breathe easily and naturally.

Focus on an object

- Here, you completely focus attention on examination of an object. Look at it in immense detail for the entire meditation.
- Objects often used are flowers, candle flames or flowing designs, but you can use other objects equally effectively (for example alarm clocks, desk lamps or even coffee mugs!).
- Examine the shape, color differences, texture, temperature and movement of the object.

Focus on a sound

- Some people like to focus on sounds they make.
- The classic example is the Sanskrit word “Om”, meaning perfection.

Whichever technique you choose, it is important to keep your attention focused. If external thoughts or distractions wander into your mind, just let them drift out.
5. HELPFUL SELF-TALK

What is it?

The things you say to yourself (your inner voice) or images you have inside your head that can help you to relax or cope with difficult situations.

When would you use it?

The technique should be used regularly to build a sense of self-worth, to relax, and to help cope with life challenges.

What do you need to do it?

Just yourself and a willingness to challenge unhelpful thinking.

Technique

If you confront a challenging situation you need to stop and listen to your inner voice. If you are saying unhelpful things (e.g. “This will be awful”; “I’ll make a fool of myself”; “I won’t be able to do this”; “It’s too difficult”; “This is so unfair”) then you need to challenge those statements and try to replace them with more helpful thoughts that will at least encourage you to make an attempt (e.g. “Well, it might be tough, but I can at least have a go”; “Last time I did this, I did ok”; “I haven’t done this before, but if I just take it calmly I can just do one step at a time”; “Life can be unfair, but that doesn’t mean that I should just give up”). Using helpful self-talk does not mean that you just “think positively”. You need to be realistic but still find more helpful ways of thinking about the situation that will help you to stay calm and not panic, so you can try to deal with the situation.
F.Y.I. - Stress

What is stress?

Stress is a feeling that is created when we confront challenging situations. These challenging situations (stressors) cover a wide range of situations including threat and danger, loss, exams, public performance, and conflict in interpersonal relationships. Stress can also be produced by the things we say to ourselves (e.g. “This will be terrible”; “I won’t be able to do this”; “I’m going to look stupid”).

How does the body respond to stressful situations?

When some threat is perceived, the brain sends messages to the autonomic nervous system that signals the adrenal glands to release the hormones adrenaline and cortisol into the bloodstream. This stress response (also called the fight or flight response) prepares the body for action by speeding up heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and metabolism. Glucose is released to provide energy. Blood flow is increased to improve delivery of oxygen to the tissues and more blood is moved to large muscle groups to prepare the body for action. Pupils widen to let in more light, and sweat is produced to cool the body.

What is the purpose of the stress response?

The stress response is vital during emergency situations such as fleeing from danger, e.g. jumping out of the path of an oncoming car. It can also be activated under situations where there is no actual danger such as sitting for an exam, playing in a final sports match, or speaking in public. A certain amount of stress can be helpful as it can improve performance by preparing the body for action and focusing concentration on the task.

But stress doesn’t always happen in response to emergency situations or things that are over quickly. Ongoing or long-term events like coping with illness, or family separation, or moving to a new school can also cause stress. These ongoing situations can produce continued low level activation of the stress response which in turn can weaken the body’s immune system and cause other problems.
### What are the physical problems associated with high levels of stress?
- Asthma
- Chronic headaches
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Coronary heart disease
- Deficient immune system and susceptibility to viral and bacterial infections
- Overeating
- Stomach problems

### What are the psychological problems associated with high levels of stress?
- Anxiety
- Sadness or depression
- Irritability or moodiness
- Problems sleeping
- Anger problems
- Substance abuse

### How can you avoid or deal with stress?
- Use planning, prioritising, and time management to manage your activities and commitments.
- Use problem solving to deal with everyday and larger problems.
- Don’t over commit yourself.
- Set realistic expectations for yourself and others.
- Take care of your physical health (good nutrition, sufficient sleep, regular exercise).
- Don’t use substances to manage stress.
- Plan some pleasant activities and make sure you have some fun.
- Keep a sense of humour.
- Use helpful thinking and challenge negative, self-defeating thoughts.
- Build your coping skills to allow you to cope and bounce back from challenges.
- Use relaxation techniques to build a sense of calm and wellbeing.
- Develop a good social support network (people who can support and talk to you).
- Don’t be afraid to seek professional help if you feel that you are not coping.
Did you know?

Numerous studies have shown that using relaxation techniques regularly can:

- Decrease the likelihood of heart attack and stroke, and can significantly reduce the incidence of a second heart attack
- Protect you from mental health problems
- Improve your immune system function
- Keep dormant infections (like cold sores) at bay
- Aid memory and learning
- Improve your coping skills and make you feel better!
OUT OF CLASS ACTIVITY

You might like to take a short break from doing your homework tonight to create a mandala. It will only take 10 minutes and might reduce stress. Taking a break will allow you to have more focus when you return to your work. Read the instructions for drawing a mandala on page 21 and use the mandala circle below or use your own paper to draw on. If you prefer, you could practise another relaxation technique that you have learned in today’s class (pages 16-25).

You might like to take your pulse before and after you do this technique and note how you feel after completing this activity.

THE MANDALA CIRCLE