



Relaxation for Carers

The Stress Response

When we are under stress, anxious or panicky the body is programmed to protect us from perceived harm by causing a physical reaction readying us in case we need to move quickly. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response.

Blame the Stone Age

From our earliest days we had to learn to survive. To do this we hunted for food, which meant being in a state of high alert ready to spring into action. When we sighted prey, all our pent-up energy was available to our muscles producing the power to run after, successfully catch prey and protect us from injury.

Modern day we only have to go to Tesco, but the body still retains this natural arousal system, and it still activates to enable us to cope with all emergencies. These crises may be actual physical threats such as a car racing towards us or a perceived threat like excessive worrying about "what if" we aren't able to do something. Both evoke our built-in fight or flight response because the body doesn't know the difference between something frightening that is really occurring, and the things that are only happening in our minds.

No one is immune to fearful thoughts; and the body's response is both a normal and very useful reaction in the right circumstances. Anxiety becomes a problem when it rises beyond normal limits and goes on for too long or it happens at inappropriate times.

Symptoms Explained

When the body has detected fearful thoughts, it releases the hormone adrenalin setting off a chain of reactions. This speeds the heart rate and consequently increases blood pressure that can cause palpitations, hot flushes, tingling hands and numbness. To keep the heart beating faster you need extra oxygen so you can breathe more quickly, this means the gases in our blood can become unbalanced producing dizziness, shortness of breath and difficulty swallowing. Due to the extra energy being sent to our arms and legs the muscles tense and may begin to feel tight causing aches. It is no wonder that people who are often tense feel tired.

As the blood is travelling to the surface muscles, we can experience feeling hotter, skin colour changes and sweating to cool us down. Since blood and energy are needed more urgently in our limbs our internal organs become of secondary importance so jobs such as digestion stop, which explains nausea, a dry mouth, and the sensation of butterflies (or food suspended) in our stomach. We may also need to go to the toilet more as the body wants to lighten its load in case there is a need to run away or protect ourselves. The physical symptoms can make us more worried.

Using Relaxation

Relaxing slows down the system in the body that speeds up when we get anxious. If we can learn to switch on our natural ability to rest, we turn down the tension as we can't experience relaxation and tension at the same time. Relaxation is a skill that is learnt gradually and requires practice. When mastered it can have a variety of benefits:

Physical Benefits

- Ease pain, muscle tension and headaches
- Lower blood pressure and pulse
- Slow breathing rate and reduce sweating
- Bring rest to all parts of the body affected by tension, stress and anxiety
- Improve energy levels
- Reduce incidents of panic attacks
- Aid sleep

Psychological Benefits

- Provide psychological relief
- Improve memory and concentration
- Increase awareness of the body, the mind and the link between them
- Enable individuals to develop more control over stressful situations
- Raise confidence in ability to cope with stress and anxiety
- Supports resilience

Other Benefits

- Encourage more balance between being 'on the go' and relaxing
- Relaxation techniques can be applied to everyday situations
- Make some improvement to your quality of life

Informal Ways of Relaxing

What may work for one person could be of no use to another, so it is important to choose something that appeals to you from the outset. Here are some suggestions from other carers:

Doing a crossword or puzzle book

Having a change of scenery

Gentle exercise

Telephoning a friend or loved one

Letter or email writing

Sharing a meal

Prayer or meditation

Light a candle and watch it for a short time

Do a face mask or beauty routine

Following sport

Cooking for pleasure

Listening to music to change how you feel

Enjoying the outdoors, even for a few minutes

Having a cuppa

Visiting others

Read a book or Kindle, listening to audio b

Indoor or outdoor gardening

Do your nails or hair

Formal Relaxation Techniques

- **On the Spot Methods** – e.g., slowly counting to ten, stretching, distracting our attention, going somewhere else, giving ourselves a pep talk.
- **Meditation** – a popular method of focusing the mind through gazing at an object, deep breathing or allowing thoughts to pass through the mind noticed but not dwelt on. One example of this is seeing thoughts as you would simply notice the weather “oh it’s raining again” - “oh look I’m thinking about that again” and just letting the thought drift away as though a cloud passing overhead.
- **Breathing** – physical exercise to slow down and control the breath. Try becoming aware of your own breathing, putting your hands on your stomach can help. Breathe in for a slow count of three, expanding the stomach, hold the breath for a slow count of three and breathe out for a slow count of three flattening the stomach. Then repeat.
- **Progressive Muscular Relaxation** – tense and release exercises sitting or lying down. Clench your arms and fists, hold, feeling the tightness then after 30 seconds release completely letting the tension go. Work through the body hunching your shoulders, pulling in your tummy, tightening your thighs, pointing your toes, drawing your eyebrows together, screwing up your eyes, biting your back teeth together, pulling your chin to your chest and dropping your head back. Breathe slowly and steadily throughout, letting go of more and more tension.
- **Guided Fantasy** – use of imagery to induce relaxation. There are many videos or CD’s available to listen to or watch calming scenes like walking on a warm beach feeling the heat of the sun and sand between your toes to lying down in cool green grass listening

to birdsong to the more exotic magic carpet rides and gentle trips to outer space. You can find these in book or music stores or online.

- **Cued Relaxation** – using the mind to systematically relax areas of the body, slowly working through it imagining your toes relaxing, then soles of your feet, then top of your feet, then your ankles etc.
- **Apps** – popular with many subscribers, apps like ‘Calm’ and ‘Headspace’ can be downloaded on to phones or computers and are full of relaxation stories, scripts read to you and some of the methods listed above to help you switch off for whatever length of time you have available.

Other Ideas that can help reduce stress

- Setting goals
- Problem solving
- Reaching out to other people, try not to keep this all inside of you building up
- Stop and check yourselves, addressing irrational thoughts and beliefs
- Reducing our expectations and the pressure we place on ourselves
- Ask for and get the help you need, talk to your GP as a starting point

Don't Be Alone

We all need the chance to unwind and hope you find something that helps you to relax.

Please do contact the PSPA Helpline on 0300 0110122. Email helpline@pspassociation.org.uk if you are having any difficulties and they will be able to support you and provide ideas for next steps.