

# Relaxation



## *A state of refreshing tranquillity*

Relaxation is one of the most valuable skills that you can acquire; it is the body's natural way of switching off the stress response or 'fight or flight' mechanism.

### **What is stress?**

In the midst of our busy modern lives we are subjected to constant demands and pressures. Stress occurs when more pressure or strain is being applied than we are designed to withstand or can easily dissipate.

Distress occurs when the perceived demands made upon us outweigh our perceived ability to cope with the demands. The way we perceive the demands is key to whether we take them in our stride, or feel able to cope with them.

### **What happens when we become stressed?**

Physical symptoms of stress include:

- Muscular tension in preparation for action, either fight or flight, and we may feel aches and pains due to tension.
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure to supply more blood to the brain and muscles; heart may pound violently.



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- Faster shallow breathing, to supply more oxygen to the muscles; excess carbon dioxide has to be expelled.
- Skin sweating, ready for cooling during expected exertion.
- Dilation of the pupils of the eyes to improve vision.
- High alertness.
- Interruptions to normal functioning to the digestive, reproduction and immune system. Sleep may also be affected.

If you have experienced all or any of the above be reassured that your body is operating in the way for which it was designed during fight or flight.

Mental and emotional symptoms of stress include:

- Feeling wound up, irritable, angry, tearful, irrational and panicky, memory lapses, loss of confidence and humour, confused thinking, feelings of going mad and helplessness.

### **The fight or flight mechanism**

The fight or flight response was originally a life-saving reaction, designed to provide high levels of energy and alertness in life-threatening situations. This enabled our early ancestors to fight or to flee if faced by an immediate physical danger, such as an attack by a sabre toothed tiger. In modern life such bodily reactions are rarely appropriate but they happen none the less.

Once a threat has been perceived, adrenaline is released into the blood stream and the body switches to 'all systems go'.



When the necessary physical action is over, the relaxation response comes into play, the body returns to a state of rest and equilibrium is restored.

The demands made on people today are ever increasing and they are often not of an immediate physical nature; the reactions are rarely those of fight or flight. The body can not differentiate real physical danger from that which is not, so imagination, memory and perception can all trigger or perpetuate the mechanism. If the stress mechanism is triggered over and over again, and the biological responses have been set in motion and kept active for long periods because the natural switch off has not occurred, exhaustion and ill health can result.

Not all stress is bad for you. A certain amount is useful in helping us to function normally. It is necessary for every day living. Too few demands can be as difficult to cope with as too many and result in our becoming bored.

### **When stress becomes a problem**

Stress can develop into a problem when it becomes overwhelming or prolonged, with no outlet or natural way of switching it off. In such situations our reactions may become restrictive, inappropriate or undesirable; we may even become prone to illness. We may start missing out on pleasures of life, be ill at ease and our relationships can suffer.

The fight or flight response, which is designed to be short-lived, is being repeatedly boosted leading to a state of constant arousal, with mind and body permanently on alert.

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While mental and emotional stress triggers the physical responses, the ensuing chronic muscle tension drains energy and increases the chance of nervous fatigue.

### **Back to balance**

We all have a different stress threshold and respond in varying ways to situations. Balance is about developing a sustainable lifestyle that is right for you. In these conditions you will function at your best, feeling good and relating in a balanced way to the people and environment around you. Understanding what is going on with your body will reassure you. These feelings you experience, although uncomfortable, cannot hurt you. Your 'alarm button' has been pressed and the fight or flight response has been activated.

Medical research has proved that deep relaxation switches on the relaxation response, so we can learn how to turn off the fight or flight response.

### **Why learn physical relaxation?**

Relaxation forms the basis of good stress management, providing a sound foundation on which to build long-term coping strategies. The regular practice of relaxation techniques can help to:

- Eliminate unnecessary fatigue.
- Enhance quality of sleep.
- Improve physical skills and mental performance.
- Lower anxiety before, during and after a demanding event.
- Increase self-confidence and improve personal relationships.
- Raise the pain threshold and alleviate pain caused by inappropriate muscle tension.
- Lower blood pressure and help in the prevention and management of stress related illnesses.
- Counteract fears and phobias.

**Remember – relaxation is the body's natural way of calming down and therefore has no side effects.**

### **Practising your relaxation**

Relaxation is a skill which anyone can learn. If a qualified teacher is not available a good CD is a very helpful tool. Just listening to the CD will not help on its own, you have to engage with it and carry out the instructions. Relaxation is a physical skill and you need to practice. If you are not used to relaxation, those involving movement exercises can be the most effective in producing early results. Once you have come to understand the feelings associated with relaxation, you can then move on to the highly successful 'passive' relaxations, which can bring even more benefit.

You need to have relaxation practices daily at the beginning. With regular practice and repetition, the skills become second nature and you do them automatically. You can learn to be more relaxed in daily living.



### **Helpful suggestions**

- If possible, plan to set aside a specific time for your regular practice. (Realise how enjoyable relaxation is, so that you can look forward to it as a period of peace and pleasure).
- If you can, choose a quiet place to work with your CD. It is 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.
- Sometimes young children enjoy relaxing with a parent doing the exercise and then snuggling up to enjoy the peace and stillness.

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- It is difficult to relax if you are cold, so make sure you are comfortably warm.
- Avoid practising when you are hungry or just after a meal.
- Do not worry whether you are doing anything correctly. NEVER TRY, just DO and enjoy the feeling!



## Afterwards

- Because your body rhythms will have slowed down, avoid jumping up quickly as you may become dizzy. Always stretch — yawn — wriggle — 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 and speak and breathe a little more gently than usual.
- Relaxation leaves muscles softened and it is important to be gentle when bringing them back into action. Remove any support cushions you might have been using. If lying, DO NOT pull yourself up using abdominal muscles, but roll on your side and push yourself into a sitting position using your arms. Then, if on the floor, get slowly on your knees and stand up.



## 20 point help strategy

- Work off the stress chemicals and muscle tension. Non-competitive physical exercise is beneficial: make sure it is appropriate for your age and physical condition.
- Talk to somebody you really trust.
- Learn to accept what you cannot change, which includes your own limitations and the world at this moment!
- Avoid self-medication with nicotine, alcohol, tranquillisers or too much caffeine.
- Get enough sleep and rest to recharge you batteries.
- Take time out for yourself.
- Learn to say no. None of us are superhuman.
- Deal with one thing at a time.
- Agree with somebody. Life is better when it is not a constant battleground.
- Manage your time and try to plan ahead. You need systems that work for you not against you.
- If you are ill, don't carry on as if you were not.
- Develop a hobby. Work can become an addiction and we all need something to counterbalance it.
- Eat sensibly and take appropriate regular exercise.
- Don't put off relaxing. Practise every day — it is important!
- Spoil yourself — give yourself a treat!
- Recognise when you are tired and do something about it.
- Delegate responsibility.
- Be realistic about perfection: it is rarely attainable!
- Get away and have a holiday whenever you can.
- Love, respect and take care of yourself.

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### Tips for everyday use

- Lower your breathing and keep it gentle.
- Drop your shoulders, keep your hands relaxed, loosen your jaw, allow your lips and tongue to soften.
- Take your time, don't rush things.
- Enjoy every pleasant feeling and sensation.
- When you feel anxious – WASP: Wait, Absorb your surroundings, Slowly, Proceed.

**REMEMBER  
RELAXATION  
A STATE OF REFRESHING  
TRANQUILITY**

- You can learn to relax and become more in tune with your own body.
- Learn to release the tightness, tension and discomfort brought on by chronic stress.
- Increase your sense of control and become less anxious.
- Experience an increased sense of well being.
- Relax the mind and the body.

Acknowledgement:  
Julie Milton, FFHT  
Complementary Therapy  
Coordinator  
Stress Management  
Training Institute

If you require this information  
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