



Anaesthesia, Surgery  
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North Bristol **NHS**  
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# The Pain Management Programme: Relaxation



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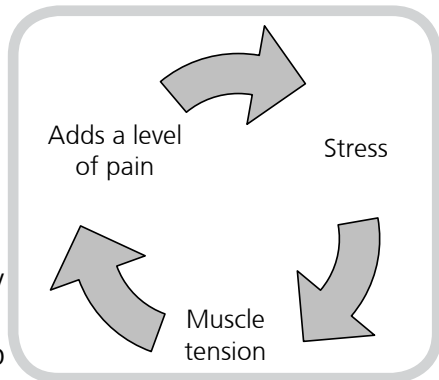
# Relaxation Techniques

When people are asked what they do to relax, they usually say things like: watch TV, read a book, have a bubble bath, go for a walk... But for many of us the usual things don't always work when we feel particularly "wound up" or "stressed out." This is why more formal ways of unwinding and relaxing can be useful.

Some people are concerned that they could lose control or become hypnotised during formal relaxation. It is important to know that formal relaxation is different to hypnosis and that you can stop at any time.

## Why use relaxation techniques?

Our bodies have two control systems. One system makes everything go faster, this system works in overdrive when we're stressed or worried. The other system slows everything down, and helps the body to rest and recover. Formal relaxation activates this rest and recovery system, which can increase 'feel good' chemicals and help break vicious cycles of stress and tension.



## Starting a relaxation practice

Relaxation is a skill like any other. Many people feel benefit from even small amounts of relaxation, but for it to be really useful in stressful situations it takes practice. For example, when you first learn to drive a car, using the steering wheel, pedals and gears can feel awkward. You wouldn't expect to start your first driving lesson on a motorway! Formal relaxation is the same, it takes practice before people can use it effectively in very stressful situations, but practise can help it become second nature.

## Building in relaxation practice

It can be hard to find time to build in a new skill. It can also be difficult to give ourselves permission to take time for ourselves. Here are ideas other people have found useful:

- "I plan it beforehand, and even write it in my diary so I take it seriously."
- "I tell my husband and kids not to disturb me for ten minutes while I'm doing my relaxation."
- "It helps me if I do it at the same time every day, just when I get home from work."
- "Doing a little and doing it often helped me learn how to do it, I started with three minutes every other day ... if I had tried to do half an hour straight off I'd probably only have done it once or twice."
- By practicing at times when I was able to feel more relaxed I found I could use it in stressful situations.

Relaxation can be done sitting or lying down or even standing up! Some people prefer to close their eyes; others find it more relaxing to look at a spot on the wall or on the floor. While often the best way to relax is in a comfortable environment, you don't always have to wait until everything is 'perfect' to have a go at formal relaxation, you can still do it even if the phone rings or the kids are noisy.

## Types of relaxation technique

There are many different types of relaxation so trying a few different kinds could help you find one that is right for you. Some popular techniques are described below – you could consider adapting one to suit you.

- **Grounding relaxation** Our minds are often in the past or trying to predict the future. Grounding relaxation is when you bring your attention into the here and now. One way to 'ground' or 'anchor' yourself is to pay attention to all your senses in turn. For example first noticing what you can hear, then what you can taste, then what you can smell, then what you can feel, and so on. From time to time you will get 'caught up' in a thought, this is very normal, just notice this and bring your attention back to the practice.
- **Autogenic relaxation** works by using the mind to affect the way the body feels. Some people find it a soothing way to relax. In autogenic relaxation you focus on one part of your body at a time before moving on. For example, you might start with your arm. You could say (out loud or in your mind), something like, "my arm is feeling heavy, my arm is feeling warm, my arm is getting warmer and heavier." After a while you would move on to another part of your body until you've worked on every part.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation** is a way of learning to identify and release tension in muscles throughout the body. This technique is helpful because it provides a marked contrast between states of tension and relaxation. During this technique you first tense a set of muscles and then relax them. Then you move on to the next set until you've worked them all. For example, you could start at your head and face, and then move down your body.
- **Imagery** is where you go into a relaxing daydream. It can be particularly good for people who think in pictures.

An example of using this method is to think of a place where you felt relaxed and safe and then imagine yourself being there again. Or you could make a place up in your mind. Then you use all your senses to imagine the place: the sights and sounds, the smells, and so on, this makes the image stronger.

- STOP technique can be useful to stop a rapid build up of tension (e.g. if feeling panicky in a situation). When you notice yourself becoming anxious or frustrated, say "Stop!" to yourself (stop getting worked up, stop panicking). Then breathe in, hold your breath for a moment, and as you breathe out say "relax". On the next breath, again, hold for a moment, then as you breathe out and say "relax" try to release the tension in one set of muscles (e.g. head, neck and shoulders). Then you move on, each time you breathe out and say "relax" you work the next set of muscles until you've done them all.

### **Relaxation 'quickies'**

As it can be hard to find time to do longer formal relaxation techniques, these are a few ideas that some people find useful almost anywhere:

- Taking 3 slower, deeper breaths
- Shrugging your shoulders then shaking your arms
- Scribbling worries on a piece of paper – once they are there they don't need thinking about anymore
- Gently stretching your neck muscles
- Yawning
- Saying the words to a favourite song out loud or silently
- Laughing
- Counting to 10
- Focussing on your breathing for a time

## Things to expect when relaxing

- Everyone's mind wanders. It is a natural, human thing. Your mind will wander when you relax too. Trying deliberately to stop a thought usually doesn't work. A better way is to notice the thoughts and then gently bring your attention back to the relaxation.
- People often say they can feel too wound up to try relaxation and that's alright, just do what you can. It's often at these times when even a tiny bit of formal relaxation is most helpful.
- Some people experience distressing thoughts or images when they try and relax. If this happens to you please come and talk to a member of the team.
- People sometimes fall asleep when they are doing formal relaxation. Some people like this side-effect but if you're trying to stay awake it can be a problem. If you want to stay awake you could:
  - Sit in a chair, rather than lying down, if you can
  - Experiment with keeping your eyes open
  - Use one type of relaxation to help you to get to sleep, and a different one during the day when you don't want to sleep
  - Try doing relaxation at a time of day when you are less tired
  - Set a time or alarm

## Summary

- Relaxation is an useful part of the pain management toolkit which can help with tension that can add to pain.
- Relaxation is a skill to be learnt - the more you do the easier it becomes.
- There can be benefits from doing as little as 30 seconds of relaxation.

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