

Relaxation techniques

Introduction

Relaxation techniques have been developed to help us manage our mind and body's response to stress, anxiety and worry. The techniques fall into two broad methods. Those that concentrate on our body and those focusing on what we are thinking about.

It is important not to forget the common methods that people use to relax, for example:

- Listening to music
- Reading a story
- Sitting back in a comfortable chair or sofa
- Going for a walk, run, cycle or drive
- Having a warm bath or shower
- Going for a swim
- Watching TV, going to the cinema or listening to the radio
- Pursuing a hobby e.g. musical instrument, a collection, craft, gardening, etc.
- Contemplating a view, scene or work of art
- Reading poetry
- Praying, meditating or attending a religious meeting/service
- Seeking solitude, peace and quiet
- Socialising with friends and family
- Playing and watching sports
- Playing with a pet

Relaxation techniques follow the same principles as these activities in that they either temporarily distract our mind, change the way we think about the things that stress and worry us or they relax the tension in our body that builds up through stress and worry.

The following techniques are suitable for most age groups but should be adapted in language and style to suit the age of the child or young person that you are working with. If the child becomes distressed for any reason during the exercises, just stop, comfort and reassure them. If they appear to be experiencing flashbacks to a traumatic experience, seek the advice of a mental health specialist. If you are aware that the child or young person has experienced serious trauma, such as sexual abuse or a serious accident, it is inadvisable to practise these techniques without the supervision of a specialist.

Progressive muscle relaxation technique

In this technique, the worker talks the young person or group through a set of exercises intended to help them notice the difference between tension and relaxation in different parts of their body. An audio recording can be made to allow them to practice the technique at home.

Care should always be taken to ensure that the child or young person is physically fit to undertake the exercises. Check that they have no illnesses or disabilities that may be exacerbated by the exercises, such as joint, muscle, heart or breathing problems. If there is any doubt seek the advice of a qualified health care specialist before proceeding.

Start by finding a quiet, warm, comfortable space where the young person can lie down on a mat or carpet with a cushion or pillow under their head. This exercise can also be done stretching out on a comfortable arm chair that supports their neck.

When giving the instructions the worker should be relaxed, avoid fidgeting and speak in a clear, slow and calm manner.

With each of the following exercises the child or young person should be reminded to breathe in deeply, hold the position for a count of five then relax and breathe out slowly saying the word 'relax' in their mind. Each exercise should be done twice, leaving 10 seconds pause before doing it for the 2nd time.

Ask them to notice the difference in tension before and after each exercise.

They should be instructed to remove their shoes, glasses and loosen tight clothing.

Ask them to lie still for a couple of minutes with their eyes closed thinking about their breathing.

Ask them to take a deep breath in and slowly breathe out expelling as much of the air in their lungs as possible before taking the next deep breath. Make sure they are breathing in from their stomach, not just their chest. As they breathe out they should say the word 'relax' in their mind.

Starting with the hands and arms ask them to take a deep breath in and make a tight fist with both hands. They should hold their breath and this position for a count of five before breathing out slowly and deeply while relaxing their hands. As they breathe out they should be reminded to say the word 'relax' in their mind.

Ask them to push their fore arms firmly down onto the floor or arms of the chair. Hold for five and relax...

Then tighten their forehead and eyebrows, hold and relax...

Wrinkle nose and cheeks, hold and relax...

Clench teeth and pull back corners of mouth, hold and relax...

Lower the chin and press back of head into the floor or chair, hold and relax...

Exaggerated shrug of the shoulders, hold and relax...

Tighten stomach muscles as if expecting a punch, hold and relax...

Press heels firmly into the floor, hold and relax...

Lift legs slightly of the ground, hold and relax...

Point toes away from head, hold and relax...

Curl feet and toes, hold and relax...

After they have completed the whole exercise they should be reminded to notice how relaxed their whole body is. They should be encouraged to remain at peace for period of time. This time will differ according to age and state of mind of the child or young person.

They should be encouraged to practice this technique regularly to help them notice when they are becoming tense and to master the ability to relax.

Guided story

In this technique, the emphasis is on the mind rather than the body. The worker tells a story or describes a tranquil situation to get the child or young person to imagine and remember scenes and sensations that are likely to be relaxing.

Again start by finding a quiet, warm, comfortable space where the young person can lie down on a mat or carpet with a cushion or pillow under their head. This exercise can also be done stretching out on a comfortable arm chair that supports their neck.

When telling the story, the worker should be relaxed, avoid fidgeting and speak in a clear, slow and calm manner. Allow plenty of pauses to give them time to imagine the scene and associated pleasant sensations.

They should be instructed to remove their shoes, glasses and loosen tight clothing.

Ask them to close their eyes and relax for a couple of minutes.

It is easiest to pick an experience or situation that you (the worker) can recall well. This way the story or scene described will flow without much effort.

The story should be general enough to allow the child or young person to relate their personal memories and imagination to it. For example, if setting the story at the seaside, avoid being specific about which town or beach the story relates to in case they have never been there or have unpleasant memories about that place.

Do include detailed description such as the colour of the sky, the feel of the warm breeze or the time of day. But again avoid naming specific things that might be matters of personal taste, for example, describe them eating their favourite food rather than assuming they enjoy fish and chips.

You can include details such as a beach hut or sailing boat, as most people can conjure up such an image. Encourage them to use their mind's eye or imagination during this exercise.

Start by setting the scene, for example:

"You are on a camping trip in the mountains with your best friends. It is late in the evening. The air is warm and full of beautiful scents of pine trees and heather. The stars are coming out and starting to twinkle as the sun sets over a glorious red and purple horizon. There is a pleasant smell of wood smoke from the camp fire as it gently drifts into the night air. You are sitting staring at the flickering orange and yellow flames in the fire as they dance around the logs and embers. There is the sound of an owl hooting in the distance and the gentle splashing of the water in a near by stream.....etc. You are totally relaxed and at peace, able to face whatever challenges life brings with confidence. When ever you feel tense or worried you can remember the calm feeling you have right now and recreate it with ease by imagining a smell, sound, sight or touch from this story".

"It is the middle of the summer holidays and you are at the beach with your closest friends..."

"You are walking in a lovely forest. It is early morning and the air is crisp and clear..."

"You wake up and look out of the window to discover it has been snowing over night..."

"It is Christmas Eve and you are lying in a warm and cosy bed..."

Remember that the detailed description within the story is very important.

It is also important to anchor the pleasant scene and its associated feelings of calm and control in the mind of the young person by suggesting they use one of the sensations they are imagining or remembering to recall the whole feeling. They should be encouraged to practice recalling the pleasant sensations conjured up by the guided story by using an anchor word from it that has strong associations for them. For example from the story above, 'wood smoke' might be something that they find easy to imagine and that reminds them of the full calming experience of the story.