

**Occupational Health, Safety
and Wellbeing Services**

Introduction to Relaxation

Wellbeing exercises



Coventry City Council

www.coventry.gov.uk/ohsw

Relaxing your muscles

Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that involves tensing and releasing your muscles in order to help relax your whole body.

- Lie on your back on a soft surface or on a work-out mat. Try to avoid draughts
- Breathe in deeply, then tense your entire body for several seconds, taking note how it feels. Then let go while exhaling – note the difference
- Tense each part of your body, slowly moving up your body bit by bit. Start with your feet. Point your toes forward and then up. Tense your calf muscles, then relax. Move onto your thighs, then your stomach muscles. Arch your back slightly and then press it into the floor
- Continue tensing individual muscle groups. Make your hands into fists, then let go. Press your arms down against the floor, then relax them. Shrug your shoulders, then relax. Tense your facial muscles (wrinkle your brow, clench your teeth, open your mouth wide) then release
- When you have finished, just lie quietly for several minutes. Your whole body should feel at rest

Meditation

Transcendental meditation focuses your mind on one thing – usually a word or phrase, also known as a mantra – in order to clear your mind and achieve a deep state of calmness.

Here is a basic transcendental meditation exercise to get you started. Try to practice this 20-minute exercise once or twice daily.

- Find a tranquil place where you won't be interrupted. Close the door, switch off your mobile phone, and put your pets out of the way. Try to avoid doing this exercise directly after eating a meal or when you are feeling hungry
- Wear loose-fitting clothes and sit in a comfortable position
- Start taking slow, deep breaths, close your eyes and repeat a word or phrase – any one you choose. It could be a religious phrase such as 'The Lord is my shepherd', a neutral word such as 'One' or an inspirational word such as 'Peace' or 'Love'

- If other thoughts enter your mind, simply redirect your attention to your chosen word or phrase
- You may find this difficult at first, but as you become more adept at meditation, you will be able to clear your mind of all distractions

Deep Breathing

Another relaxation technique is to focus on your breathing. During times of stress, we tend to take short, shallow breaths, filling only the upper chest with oxygen.

Children, however, instinctively fill their lungs completely by breathing from their abdomens in what is called deep or diaphragmatic, breathing.

Deep breathing not only increases your oxygen intake, but it also helps to reduce tension and, therefore, encourages a state of relaxed alertness. Try to practice this technique once daily.

- Lie on your back with your feet slightly apart
- Breathe in slowly through your nose. Let the tip of your tongue gently touch the roof of your mouth throughout this exercise. If your nose is blocked, inhale through your slightly opened mouth
- Count to four as you inhale, feeling the warm air moving deeply into your lungs. Ensure that your abdomen – not your chest – expands as your lungs fill with air
- Hold the breath in your lungs as you count to four again, slowly
- Exhale slowly with a whoosh of sound, again to the count of four, imagining the tension moving out with the air. Contract your stomach muscles to expel all of the air out of your lungs. Keeping your shoulders on the floor at all times
- Pause for a few seconds, then repeat. As you become more relaxed, you may find that you can increase your counts effortlessly, going up to a count of eight

Visualisation

Athletes enhance their performance by using visualisation techniques. They imagine themselves executing the perfect high jump or sprint before actually doing it.

If you picture yourself calm and in control, your body will respond in kind. Studies have shown that visualisation can lessen anxiety.

- Take a few deep breaths (see deep breath exercises)
- Now picture a peaceful scene. It may be a holiday memory, a lake, a tropical paradise, a mountaintop or any other place where you feel calm
- Immerse yourself in every aspect of the scene, e.g. imagine the colour of the sky or grass, the feel of the warm breeze on your face. Imagine other senses such as the smell of the ocean, pine trees or wild flowers, the chirp of the birds or the rhythmic sound of waves crashing on the beach. Let these details absorb your full attention for about 5 or 10 minutes
- Notice your breathing is now slower, more regular when you are ready to disengage, simply allow the image to slowly fade away from your mind

Further information:

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