

A Guide to Relaxation for Optimal Breathing

The aim of relaxation

There are many times in our lives when we will feel stressed. This maybe a physical stress, such as pain from an injury or illness, or emotional stress such as bereavement. Sometimes stress or pressure encourages us react in a positive way to overcome whatever is worrying us, i.e. focusing on revision.

However, sometimes the physical symptoms of the stress can cause us to feel unwell and unable to cope. The flight or fight response is how the body reacts to stressful events, by increasing the breathing rate, making the heart pump faster and increasing the tension in our muscles it gets us ready to run or fight.

Our nervous system works harder which can leave us feeling exhausted and unable to make decisions easily and it may disturb our sleep patterns, further adding to our feelings of tiredness.

Physical Signs of Tension

There are many ways your body may reflect tension, including:

- Hunched posture
- Frowning
- Jaw clenching or teeth grinding
- Tightly crossed legs
- Hands clenched into a fist
- Altered breathing pattern – e.g. Shallow, Rapid or Breath-holding

Learning how your body feels when it is stressed can help you to recognize the first physical signs of stress. Once you recognize these signs you can use relaxation techniques to stop them escalating.

There are many forms of relaxation and different types work for different people, for example, reading a book, working on a hobby, or going for a walk, are all recognized methods to help us relax.

Sometimes, however, it is good to find some time to allow your body to relax as well as your mind and for you to enjoy the feeling of muscles letting go of their tension. The **Laura Mitchell Method of Relaxation** is a structured series of exercises to help you learn how to recognize the physical symptoms of stress and how to ease them. We recommend this method as it reflects our advice on maintaining a good breathing pattern.

The sequence for each part of your body is: move away from the position of stress, stop the movement, feel and be aware of the new (relaxed) position.

On the next page is a suggested order but you can alter this to suit your body. You can practice relaxation in many positions once you have learnt the basics, but to begin with it is advisable to lie on your back, with pillows under your head and your legs, if you are unable to lie down, try sitting in a chair with your back and knees supported. It is important that you are comfortable

Breathing

Breathe gently through your nose keeping your upper chest relaxed.

Each time you breathe out allow your body to let go a little more until your muscles feel heavy

Take time to check your breathing after every movement, ensure you are maintaining a gentle pattern and not breath holding.

Shoulders: Pull your shoulders down to your feet-Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Elbows: Slide your elbows away from your body-Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Hands: Stretch your fingers and thumbs out-Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Hips: Turn your hips outwards, rolling knees away from each other-Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Feet and Ankles: Push your feet away from your head, pointing your toes gently- Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Body: Push your body into the bed (or chair) along the length of your spine-Stop- Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Head: Push your head back into the pillow-Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Mouth and Jaw: With your lips closed stretch your lower jaw down (as if yawning)- Stop-Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Forehead: Raise your eyebrows towards your hairline-Stop- Feel the new position and breathe with your diaphragm.

Afterwards take the time to come round slowly and stretch out fully.

Quick Summary

- With a little practice, relaxation can be used by everyone, wherever they are, giving a feeling of control over runaway symptoms or feelings.
- Regular practice will allow you to master the technique, and then adapt it to suit your life - a quick change in position of your shoulders plus a stretch of your jaw may help relieve tension while driving.
- There are many forms of relaxation and it may take time for you to find one that works for you.