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# Palliative Care Team

## Breathlessness Intervention Service

### Fact sheet five: Relaxation

#### Learning to relax

Breathlessness can often cause anxiety and feelings of panic. Anxiety tends to make the feeling of breathlessness stronger, which in turn leads to more anxiety. It is important to remember that breathlessness in itself is not harmful and you will recover your breathing on resting. It is also possible to try to control the level of anxiety you are feeling and relaxation is one way of helping with this. Relaxation is a useful skill that you can learn. This leaflet will go through some ways to help you to learn how to relax.

#### How does my body react to a stressful event?

It is normal for our bodies to experience some degree of anxiety and these feelings are caused by the body preparing itself to perform (known as "fight or flight"). Imagine you are crossing a road, when you notice a car coming towards you. It is your anxiety that helps you get out of the way. So some anxiety is useful.

However, when this anxiety begins to affect life to an extent where you are experiencing unpleasant symptoms and unable to do what you want to do, it is helpful to understand the reasons why this is happening so that you are able to address these difficulties.

When we become anxious, the eyes and ears sense a threat and alert our brain. This then stimulates the adrenal glands situated next to the kidneys to produce adrenaline and release it into our blood stream. It reaches the heart, lungs and muscles and causes the reactions needed to help an individual fight or flee.

Because of your body responding like this, when you feel anxious you might experience some of the following things

**Body** - symptoms such as tensed muscles, rapid heart beat, difficulties breathing, chest pains, sweating, dizziness, nausea, dry mouth, blurred vision or the need to go to the toilet more frequently.

**Thoughts** - negative thinking for example imagining the worse, appearing foolish, worrying about "going mad", thinking that you are having a heart attack, etc

**Actions** - behaviour can be affected by thoughts and actions. Anxiety induced behaviours include avoiding situations or people, poor concentration, aggression, irritability and sleep problems

## How can I control my anxiety?

- Recognise what triggers your anxiety.
- Are there certain situations that make you feel more anxious?
- Write down the kinds of things that worry or concern you.
- Try not to worry about future events, concentrate on the present.
- Try to identify problems and solve them one at a time.
- Mention how you are feeling to health professionals.
- Learn a way of relaxing that works for you.

## Preparing for relaxation

Relaxation does not come easily to any one of us but the more you practice the easier and more effective you will find it. Try to allow yourself to have some time each day to practice your relaxation exercise.

Tell the people with whom you share your home that you will need at least 20 minutes every day to practice relaxation undisturbed. Allow plenty of time for relaxation so that you will finish slowly and gently. Ensure the light and temperature of the room is at a comfortable level.

### Positioning

- Check your posture.
- Ensure that your neck, shoulders and arms are relaxed.
- Sit or lie with your legs uncrossed.
- Try to have your elbows supported at your side on cushions or on the arm of the chair.
- Let your shoulders and arms sink down into the cushions.
- Try to close your eyes. If this is too difficult, choose a spot in front of you, on the wall or floor and keep your eyes fixed on this point. When you are relaxed it will be easier to keep your eyes closed.

### When you finish your relaxation exercise

- Become aware of the real surroundings by listening to the sounds around you.
- Be aware of how relaxed you feel.
- Start to move very gently by stretching your arms and legs before moving from your position.

## Relaxation exercises

These might be something that you can try with a friend or relative together. It might be helpful to have someone read these out to you for the first few times until they become familiar.

## A. Visualisation

Try to visualise a relaxing scene. It could be your favourite place, a walk that you know, a garden or the beach. It could equally be somewhere from your imagination. Somewhere that makes you feel happy and secure, but not places that evoke bad or sad memories.

### Your chosen scene

When you feel that your chosen scene is developing in your imagination use your five senses to make it more real to you.

- What can you see? What are the shapes and colours of the trees, leaves, grass, fences, clouds, and sky in your scene?
- Try to see the small details using your imagination.
- Slowly move on to enhance this with the senses of smell and sound.
- Ask yourself what can you hear (maybe seagulls, waves or wind) and smell in your special place.
- Imagine picking up a small object, a shell, some sand or a flower.
- In your mind feel it; what is its texture, how does it smell?
- Perhaps in your scene you have something to eat, a sweet, ice cream or maybe you can taste the salt air.
- Use the sense of taste to enhance your imaginary image.

From time to time, remember to note how comfortable and happy you are in this special place. Make sure you reinforce the experience as positive. When you feel relaxed and it is time to finish, walk away from your scene in your mind and gently re-enter the real world.

## B. Letting go of thoughts

- Spend a few moments taking control of the pace and regularity of your breathing.
- Close your eyes and imagine that you are sitting on the bank of a river.
- You are warm and relaxed, and able to breathe freely.
- You see many leaves slowly drifting downstream.
- When a thought or feeling comes into your mind, try to see this as a leaf and let it drift away from you, and disappear.
- When it's gone, return to gazing at the river waiting for the next leaf to float by with a new thought.
- Try not to think about the contents of each leaf. Just observe it and then let it go.
- Sometimes the same leaf may come up many times or several leaves will seem related to each other, or the leaves may be empty. That's okay.
- Don't allow yourself to be concerned with these thoughts. Just watch them pass in front of your mind's eye.

### C. Body scan

- Begin by focussing your attention on your feet, trying to release the tension in your muscles.
- First your toes, working up through your ankles to your calves and shins, over your knees and along your thighs.
- Notice how loose your legs feel now.
- Become aware of your tummy and then your chest. Feel the tension flowing out of your body.
- Now think of your shoulders travelling down to your elbows, through your forearms, and into your wrists, hands and fingers.
- Become aware even of your fingertips.
- Notice how loose your arms feel now.
- Next, focus your attention on your lower back and pelvis. Try to release any tension you are feeling here.
- Allow this feeling of looseness rise up your back, to the back of your chest and shoulder blades
- Continuing up into your neck and scalp, to the crown of your head.
- Slowly begin to focus on your forehead and move down to your jaw.
- Imagine that you have a giant paint brush, sweeping over your body, following the same route and creating a feeling of calm and relaxation.
- Feel that every part of your body is relaxed.



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### Document history

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