
Back pain management programme

Introduction to relaxation

Relaxation is a feeling of being calm. We feel tension in the body and mind and then let go of that tension. People with Chronic Pain can feel muscle tension as a response to their pain. This muscle tension becomes part of their pain and may contribute to a major part of it. If we get rid of the muscle spasm then a lot of the pain will disappear.

Relaxation can help to relieve muscle tension and is a very important coping strategy. If we learn to relax our muscles, we can reduce our pain. If we are more relaxed our muscles are not as stiff and our joints move easier so activities such as walking should be a lot easier. Relaxing can also calm you.

Relaxation skills take a long time to learn and should be done on a daily basis. Do not wait until you have a day when the pain is very severe to try relaxation for the first time because it probably will not work. It should be done on the good days so that hopefully the bad days may not occur quite as often. Then, when you have bad days you can lessen the amount of discomfort you have by using it.

Different types of relaxation techniques

1. Relaxed breathing

This is a way to make breathing even and slow. Breathing should occur at a natural pace. You should 'let the air in' rather than 'taking a breath'. A smooth transfer should take place between inhalation and exhalation.

2. Systematic focusing

This focuses on imagining that different parts of the body are relaxed.

3. Visual Imagery

Your mind refocuses away from the pain onto something pleasant and in turn your muscles relax.

Advantages in practising relaxation

- Reduce the stress response, helping you to gain more control over your life.
- Reduce pain – by decreasing muscle tension, aches and pains then become less likely. It can also increase the threshold of pain, or delay and lessen the perceived pain.

- Relief of muscle tension/spasm – relaxed muscles break the vicious cycle of pain and tension.
- Relaxation releases endorphins in the brain to relieve pain.
- Promotes sleep allowing the body to rest peacefully and calm the mind. You may feel quite drowsy when you are relaxed, especially if you are feeling tired. As you begin to practice the techniques you may well find that your sleep pattern improves.
- It will help you to calm yourself and cope better with pain and other stresses – pain often results in distress, irritability and feelings of helplessness.

Other ways of relaxing

You may have your own way of relaxing, such as having an enjoyable long bath, massage, aromatherapy or yoga. Hobbies induce undeniable feelings of well-being and fulfilment. Humour is also relaxing. However, you cannot always do these things when you need to relax, so it will also be important to learn a relaxation technique that you can do anywhere. If you have already learnt a technique and you are happy with it, keep using it.

As with all skills, the only way to become good at relaxing is to practice it as often as possible. Relaxation is a skill which is learnt and will improve with practice. Initially the aim is to relax in a quiet environment where you feel comfortable and free from distraction. The techniques, once established, can then be used in alternative environments, for example, at work or on the bus.

Remember:

- Using relaxation is a reliable and positive method of making progress to coping with your pain.
- It makes you feel good.
- It helps you to sleep naturally.
- It is a strong weapon in your determination to reclaim your lifestyle and not allow the pain to be in control.
- It becomes more effective the more you use it.
- Stick with it!

Relaxed abdominal breathing

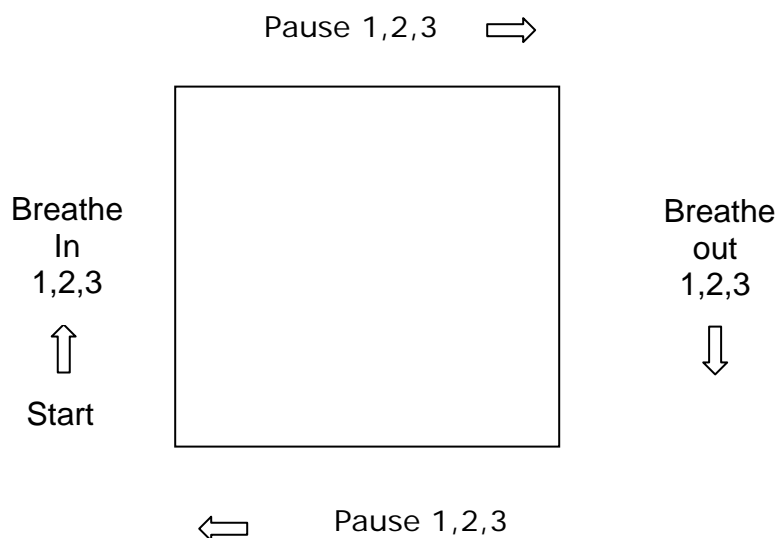
This is an important part of complete relaxation. Breathing should occur at your natural pace. It should be seen in terms of 'letting the air in' rather than 'taking a breath'. A smooth transfer should take place inhalation and exhalation.

- Start by learning correct breathing techniques when lying down on a mat or on your bed, or sit in a comfortable and supportive chair.
- Concentrate on your breathing. Generally, we tend to breathe only into the upper part of our lungs. This breathing becomes shallow when we are anxious.
- Relaxed abdominal breathing fills the lower half of our lungs, a more efficient and controlled way of breathing.
- Begin by breathing through your nose. Rest your hands at the bottom of your rib cage, your fingertips lightly touching.
- Feel the area beneath your fingertips. As you breathe in, your fingertips should rise and separate as your abdomen expands. As you breathe out, your fingertips should fall and move together again. If you are doing the techniques correctly, your chest will move only very little.
- Another way of checking that you are breathing correctly is to put one hand on the upper part of your chest and the other on your abdomen. When you breathe in your abdomen should expand and your upper chest should not move much.
- Try and keep breathing calm, smooth and continuous.
- Concentrate on the word 'relax', say 're' to yourself as you breathe in and 'lax' as you breathe out.

The breathing square

Begin by visualizing a square in your mind or concentrate on a square in the room (a window frame, TV, picture).

As you breathe in and out, work around the square as shown below:



This technique will help to control and regulate your breathing by working around the square, paying attention to the instructions and keeping to the time values. It will also prevent any tendency towards over-breathing.

Both these techniques can be done anytime you want to. People do not have to know you are doing them. Shorter relaxation techniques used during the day will help to avoid building up stress and tension.