



B8. Practise relaxation, meditation and/or mindfulness



Relaxation is not something that you “do”. It is a natural response that you allow to happen. Relaxation is what is left when you stop creating tension.

The ability to relax can be very helpful for everyone. It is especially useful and effective when dealing with the problems associated with chronic pain.

Getting wound up and tense can make existing pain worse. It can create more pain such as headaches, neck pain and low back pain. This can lead to a vicious cycle of:

Chronic pain → tension → more pain → more tension

Relaxation can help you to reduce tension and stop your pain from getting worse.

- Chronic pain often results in distress, irritability and feeling helpless. All these feelings make it harder to cope with your pain. **Relaxation will help you to cope better with pain**
- It can be difficult to fall asleep if you are in pain or feeling tense. You might also wake several times a night and find it hard to drop off again. **Relaxation can help you fall asleep and to get back to sleep if you waken**
- You might be taking sleeping pills or tranquilisers to help you relax. These types of medication are meant for short term use only. They can be difficult to stop taking and they can make matters worse in the long-term. **Relaxation is more useful and healthier than long term use of medication to make you sleep.**
- You might have tried relaxation in past and had some difficulty with it. You may feel that you have “never been able to relax”. Don’t worry, relaxation is a skill. The more you practise, the more effective it will be. **Relaxation improves with practise.**



How to relax

It is very useful if you have some activities that you relax you. A quiet walk, listening to music, reading a good book or a hobby that you can become engrossed in. These things can distract you and make you feel a little more relaxed. However, **relaxation is what happens when we stop creating tension. Relaxation happens when we stop doing and just start being.**

Once you have learned to relax, you can combine relaxation with activity. As you become more skilled you will be able to walk and move in a more relaxed way and you will be able to quieten your mind when it “just won’t switch off”.

Good positions for relaxation

Lying on the floor in the “dead body” position is good for those who can manage it. Lying on your back, with your arms resting on the floor, palms facing upwards, legs slightly apart and feet relaxed.

For those with back pain, lying on the floor with your lower legs supported on a stool / chair / sofa (so you are “chair shaped”) can reduce pain in the back.

Sitting – choose a chair that supports your head ensure that your feet are flat on the floor.

These positions support your body so that you can allow your muscles to relax.

Practise the following steps whenever you get 5 minutes:

1. Let your eyes close if you are happy to do so. Otherwise, let your eyes focus on an object in front of you
2. Take a normal breath in and let it out slowly. Say the word “calm” to yourself in your imagination as you breathe out.
3. Be aware of your breathing. Notice the calm, slow rhythm or focus on the sound of your breath.
4. Imagine a peaceful happy scene. For example: remember the nicest place you ever went on holiday and take yourself back there in your imagination. Or make up a place where you would like to be right now and create that scene in your mind.

Being realistic: Make time to practise, you may not become highly skilled straight away.

Check your level of tension by scanning your body. Ask “where am I creating tension?” check your forehead, eyes, and shoulders. Check your sitting and standing position and adjust your body to let go of any unnecessary tension.

Some common difficulties with Relaxation Practise

Falling asleep – Ideally it is best to stay awake so that you can learn the technique. However, it is OK if you fall asleep because this shows how good relaxation is for sleep problems.

It takes practise to allow yourself to relax. You can’t TRY to relax, you let relaxation happen.

Pain interrupting – The choices are either to change position or relax with the pain for a while and see if it passes or reduces. Do what you need to do to be comfortable. It may be easier to relax with a dull ache than with a sharp stabbing pain. You be the judge. It’s important to slow your out-breath down and focus on breathing out gently if pain disturbs you. Never hold your breath with pain.



Panic or feeling fearful – This is fairly common if you are not used to relaxing. Feeling panicky is unpleasant but it soon passes. Again, it is vital to slow down your out-breaths. Feel the chair or the floor or bed supporting you and tell yourself that you are safe in the room. Tell yourself: “ I am OK, I can slow my breathing, I am safe, this will soon pass”. Learning relaxation skills, especially controlled breathing skills, will soon enable you to feel in control of panic or anxiety.

Mind wandering off, not being able to stay focused – This is common when you are learning relaxation. Practise simple techniques, such as focusing on your breathing for one minute several times a day. You will soon get used to focusing on just one thing. When you are relaxing and your mind wanders off, just notice what happened and gently bring your attention back to what you are doing. Stay in the present.

Remember that relaxation is a skill. It takes time to learn any skill and relaxation is no exception. We can help you to overcome difficulties that you might have learning, so let us know if you have any problems during relaxation so that we can help you.