The Use of Relaxation to Manage Anxiety

*This self help tip sheet was adapted from Edmund. J. Bourne Ph.D, “Anxiety and Phobia Workbook” New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 1995

Why it is important

There are multiple factors that may contribute to anxiety. On a physical level, contributing causes include muscle tension, shallow breathing, and bodily stress reactions.

Relaxation is a vital tool to help you manage your anxiety. Achieving deep relaxation means reducing your heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, muscle tension and racing thoughts. It can also help you to feel more relaxed the rest of the time and help you to deal with stress more effectively.

How relaxation can help to reduce anxiety

Research has shown that practicing relaxation can:

- Reduce general anxiety and panic attacks,
- Help your body recover from the effects of built up stress,
- Help you to feel more energetic and productive
- Improve your concentration and memory
- Improve the quality of your sleep and help combat insomnia
- Prevent psychosomatic problems such as high blood pressure, migraines, asthma and ulcers

There are a variety of ways that you can achieve deep relaxation. Some of them are:

- Abdominal breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualising a peaceful scene
- Meditation

Abdominal Breathing

- The way you breathe directly reflects the level of tension you carry in your body.
- When tense, our breathing becomes shallow, rapid and high in the chest.
- When relaxed, our breathing is fuller, deeper and from the abdomen.
- It is physically difficult to stay tense and breathe from the abdomen at the same time.

**Take time to notice how you breathe. Do you tend to breathe from your chest, mouth open? Do you breathe more rapidly when stressed, anxious or frightened?**

- Breathing exercises are designed to slow down and deepen your breathing, by breathing slowly, evenly and sending air right down to the bottom of your lungs so that your abdomen, back and sides rise and fall with each breath rather than just your chest.
- Breathing exercises help you to achieve a deep state of relaxation after as little as 3-5 minutes. They can also diminish anticipatory anxiety or abort a panic attack.
- Try practicing a breathing exercise daily for at least 5 minutes and once you feel that you’ve mastered the technique, you can use it whenever you feel anxious or panicky.
• You may also notice that it helps you to feel more relaxed in general and that you have gradually retrained yourself to breathe from the abdomen.

**Progressive muscle relaxation**

• Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is based on the principle that a muscle can be relaxed more effectively if it is tensed first and then released, producing a deep state of relaxation.

• PMR involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, sixteen different muscle groups of the body. Tense firmly for about 10 seconds and then let go suddenly, giving yourself 15-20 seconds to relax, noticing the difference in how the muscle feels compared to when it was tensed. Then move on to the next muscle group.

• Try saying to a relaxing phrase to yourself like “I am relaxing”, or “Let the tension flow away” while relaxing between successive muscle groups.

• Focus on your muscles, and if your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you are working on.

• Try making a tape with instructions that you can play at first to prompt you as you move through each muscle group.

**Visualisation – the peaceful scene**

• Try visualising yourself in a peaceful scene after a PMR. The peaceful scene can be anything you imagine – a quiet beach, rainforest, a mountain top or even the stuff of imagination – floating on a cloud or flying on a magic carpet.

• The goal is to visualise the scene in sufficient detail so that it completely absorbs your attention.

• Visualisation constitutes a light form of self-hypnosis.

• Try to use all of the senses – sight, hearing, smell, touch and even taste. This will increase the power of the scene so that you can experience it as though you were actually there.

**Meditation**

• Meditation involves bringing yourself to a place of ‘just being’, where the everyday concerns recede and you experience yourself in the present moment, focussing on being in the here and now. It can be helpful to practice when you find your mind is racing.

• There are two common forms of meditation, using a mantra or counting breaths:

  o The mantra method: involves selecting a word or phrase (eg. “one” or “Let go”) to focus on and repeating it with each exhale of breath.

  o The counting breaths method: involves focussing on the in and outflow of your breath, counting each exhalation. You can count progressively forwards and backwards (eg. to 10 and back) or just choose one number.

**For either method, if any thoughts come to mind or your focus wanders, don't judge yourself. Instead, let the thoughts pass over and through you and gently bring your attention back to the mantra or your counting. Or you can just focus on breathing in and out.**

**Down time**

• It can be difficult to stick to a regular program of relaxation. In our fast paced society, there are so many demands that taking time out often becomes less of a priority. Remember that it is important
to give priority to your health and well being and relaxation is one way to do this. Be willing to do less and have a more balanced lifestyle.

- Having time out or down time is also important to stop stress becoming cumulative and to avoid burning out.
- Think about having down time for 1 hour per day, 1 day per week and 1 week out of every 12-16 weeks. During this time, set aside responsibilities and work and only engage in activities that you find pleasurable or restful (e.g. having a hot bath, reading a great book, going bushwalking, going for a drive, or enjoying time with a person or people you love and care about).

**Time management**

You may also need to think about applying techniques of time management. This might involve:

- **Prioritisation** - Allow yourself to let go of the trivial or less important tasks. Give relaxation a higher priority!
- **Delegation** – Give up on the idea that only you can do an adequate job and be willing to entrust the responsibility of a task to someone else.
- **Allowing extra time** – Allow more time to do things and don’t expect yourself to do too many things in one time period. Be willing to do less.
- **Letting go of perfectionism** – It’s okay to do your best, make some mistakes along the way and accept the results, even if your efforts fall short. Don’t expect yourself to be perfect.
- **Saying no** – You may wish to always please others because your self image requires you to be nice all the time. You may need to redefine what you think of as ‘being nice’. Remember that you can be of little use to others if you are burnt out and stressed and are much more likely NOT to be nice when you are feeling this way!

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at **9925-4365** between 9am and 5pm.