

## Relaxation Exercises

### *Abdominal Breathing Exercise*

1. First take note of the level of tension that you are feeling. Where is this tension in your body?
2. Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
3. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the “bottom” of your lungs – in other words, send the air as low down as you can. If you’re breathing from your abdomen, your hand should actually *rise*. Your chest should move only slightly while your abdomen expands.
4. When you’ve taken in a full breath, pause for a moment and then exhale slowly through your nose or mouth, depending on your preference. Be sure to exhale fully. *As you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go.* You might visualize your arms and legs going loose and limp like a rag-doll.
5. Do ten full, slow breaths. Try to keep your breathing *smooth* and *regular*, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once. It will help you to slow down your breathing if you slowly count to four on the inhale (1-2-3-4) and then slowly count to four on the exhale. Remember to pause briefly at the end of each inhalation. Count to ten down to one counting backwards one number with each *exhalation*. The process should go like this:

Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale (count “ten”)  
Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale (count “nine”)  
Slow inhale...Pause...Slow exhale (count “eight”)

Practice this pattern down to one. If you start to feel light-headed while practicing this technique, stop for 15-20 seconds, and then start again.

6. Extend the exercise if you wish by doing two or three “sets” of abdominal breaths, remembering to count backwards from ten to one for each set (each exhalation counts as one number). *Five full minutes* of abdominal breathing will have an effect in reducing anxiety and stress.

### *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a systematic technique for achieving a deep state of relaxation. It was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson who discovered that a muscle could be relaxed by first tensing it for a few seconds and then releasing it. Tensing and releasing various muscle groups throughout the body produces a deep state of relaxation, which when practiced regularly has been found to reduce physiological symptoms of stress.

PMR is especially helpful for people whose anxiety is strongly associated with muscle tension. Some people experience this as tightness in their neck and shoulders, headaches, backaches, clenching of the jaw, or tenderness around the eyes. Systematically relaxing your muscles can help ease these symptoms of anxiety, as well as help you quiet your mind and manage troubled or racing thoughts. Dr. Jacobson himself once said, “**An anxious mind cannot exist in a relaxed body.**” You are encouraged to practice PMR at least *20 minutes per day*. Over time, the relaxation experience that you achieve during PMR will *generalize* to the rest of your day. The regular practice of PMR can help you manage your anxiety, feel more energized, and face stressful situations.

The following guidelines are helpful to keep in mind before you begin PMR:

- Find a *quiet location* to practice where you won't be distracted. Turn off the phone and answering machine and use a fan or air conditioner to help block out background noise.
- Practice PMR at regular times. Some people choose to use this technique before going to bed, or in the mornings. If possible, practice on an empty stomach, as food digestion after meals can tend to disrupt deep relaxation.
- Get into a *comfortable position*. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Lying down on a sofa or bed or sitting in a reclining chair are two ways of supporting your body most completely. (If you feel sleep, it is preferable to sit up rather than lay down.)
- Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow *taking care of yourself* to have precedence over any of your worries.
- Be gentle with yourself – don't judge your performance or worry too much about how well you are practicing the technique. Try to “let yourself go” and not try to control your body.

### *Progressive Muscle Relaxation Instructions*

When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously, without straining, for 7-10 seconds. Concentrate on what is happening. Feel the buildup of tension in each particular muscle group. It is often helpful to visualize the particular muscle group being tensed. When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15-20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.

Allow all the other muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group. Tense and relax each muscle group at once. But if a particular area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times.

1. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up towards your shoulders and “making a muscle” with both arms. Hold...and then relax.
4. Tighten your triceps –the muscle on the undersides of your upper arms- by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold...and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold...and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold...and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around the area of your eyes.
7. Tighten your jaw by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold...and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back; as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your

neck. Hold...and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the same tense-relax cycle twice.

9. Take a few deep breaths and tune into the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold...and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades...and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds...and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold...and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. Hold...and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold...and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold...and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold...and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold...and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.