

Skill #2

***Relaxation
and
Imagery***

The Benefits of Relaxation:

1. **Gain Control of the Mind.** This clears the mind of negative thoughts (and feelings), promotes creativity and enhances problem solving as alpha brain waves are increased. Alpha waves are associated with peace of mind and feelings of well being.
2. **Never out of Control.** The participant allows himself to relax to the degree that he chooses, and is able to terminate the experience at will.
3. **Inoculation against future stress.** With experience, the participant learns to recognize stress and tension when it starts to build up, and can correct it before it becomes a headache, backache, pain in the neck, etc.
4. **Useful for people with chronic pain.** Relaxation helps to release endorphins, the body's own natural pain killers. Relaxation combined with certain visualization techniques helps to lessen pain, especially secondary pain.
5. **A general calming response.** Can be used at anytime regardless of surroundings. Once familiar and practiced, the relaxation response can be elicited in a very few minutes, in any place, at any time.

The positive effects of relaxation are usually not experienced immediately. In fact, it is a response which most of us learn, allowing for adequate practice over time.

Nearly everyone can learn to relax their body in a short time, but wayward thoughts are the most common difficulty. The attitude to unwanted thoughts should be that of an uninvolved observer. Allow any thoughts to roll on, to come and to go, and they will eventually stop.

We recommend that you practice daily for 2-4 weeks. After this time you will be able to elicit the relaxation response by breathing deeply and using the cue word "Relax", or your own cue word.

Mental anxiety, stress and physical tension are interrelated. If we break that cycle at any point, relaxation will occur.

Relaxation training requires a passive, "let it go" attitude. An effort to relax is usually a failure to relax. Relaxation is part of each of us. All we are doing is allowing it to occur by retraining the body and mind to recognize the difference between tension and relaxation.

The research supporting the use of relaxation techniques is extensive. As a treatment for pain, stress and medical conditions, relaxation has been clearly shown to be effective. It helps to achieve a sense of peace by letting go of tensions, clearing the mind and allowing release from problems. It is almost impossible to think or feel negatively when one is relaxed. Relaxation is the starting point in the process of calming emotions and changing thoughts. Thus, relaxation acts both as a distraction and an energizer. It allows the body to function in a healthier way, for example by lowering high blood pressure, and strengthening the immune system.

Practice at home so that relaxation becomes another coping tool to be used to help you accomplish what you value.

Reading, watching TV, talking to a friend, being on holiday, jogging or walking, enjoying nature, etc. are all examples of light relaxation. Just as there are different stressors for different people, different types of relaxation will appeal to different people. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR), however, brings about a deeper, more profound sense of well-being, and can be used with other forms of relaxation.

With practice, relaxation clears the mind and rids the body of unwanted tension in minutes.

Set the Scene

It is important to be free of distraction and interruptions. Become as comfortable as possible, whether lying down (preferable) or sitting in a chair, by loosening any tight clothing and removing shoes and glasses. Support your head if you are sitting in a chair. This exercise takes about 3 – 4 minutes.

a) Close your eyes and put your hands on your lap. Put your attention on your breath. Notice how you inhale and exhale. If your mind wanders, just bring it back to your breath.

b) After you have focused your mind on your breathing for a few moments, put your hands on your lap and then bring your attention to your hands resting on your lap. Be aware of your hands resting there—the position of your palms and fingers. Enjoy that awareness. You do not have to do anything to your hands—simply be aware of them. Enjoy the sensation of awareness. Now say to yourself, quietly or under your breath, "My hands are heavy, my hands are heavy." Again, you do not do anything just enjoy that awareness and sensation. If your mind wanders, just bring it back to your hands. Again, say to yourself, "My hands are heavy," and once more, "My hands are heavy." Enjoy feeling your hands resting on your lap. Now you are ready to end this

exercise on a count of three — one, to take a deep breath, two, to open your eyes, and three to look around and stretch. Congratulate yourself on what you have done! (This exercise is the first step in a series called Autogenics).

c) Choose a favorite piece of instrumental music that reflects your mood or will bring about the quality of feeling you would like to experience. Simply let the music flow through you and focus on the beauty in it.

Be certain that you will not be disturbed, so that you can give your full attention to the moment. Remember that imagery is easy, and trying hard doesn't work. Be patient with yourself.

Imagery & Relaxation

Imagery is an effective way to gain insight, build self-esteem, Relieve pain, resolve inner conflicts and help people to actively participate in their own healing process. With a sense of playfulness we will explore our imagination which may be our most significantly under utilized healing source.

Essential to imagery work is relaxation. Try out several techniques for relaxation and discover what works best for you.

Find yourself a comfortable place to sit or lie down, and put your attention on your breath. Just notice how you are breathing, don't attempt to change anything. Simply be aware of the rhythm of you breathing, and how effortless it is to breathe. Let th air breathe you. Then imagine one of the following:

- a) You are like a pad of butter melting in the warm sun. Feel the warmth of the sun on your body. The warm rays feel soothing and nurturing. Your body releases tension and gently relaxes.
- b) You are in an elevator that is slowly descending floor by floor. At each floor you become more ad more relaxed. Feel the gentle sensation as the elevator takes you safely and gently into a deep state of relaxation.

Quick Relaxation Techniques

1. The clenched fist: Clench your fist tightly for a count of ten. Release and let your whole body go completely limp.
2. The deep breath: Take a full deep breath and hold it for a count of ten. When you exhale let it all out at once, letting your body go completely loose and limp. This is related to the first technique in that it too involves an initial tightening (holding the breath for a count of ten followed by a sudden and complete release as you let your breath out all at once.) In addition, it takes advantage of another basic principle — the fact that the body is most relaxed when exhaling.
3. The breathing countdown: Breathing normally, let go more and more as you release each breath, while counting slowly from 10 to 0, one number per breath. By focussing on the “letting go” feeling as you let out each breath let go even more to produce a cumulative effect. Counting backwards (one number per breath) helps create the effect of descending (as if you were in an elevator going down another floor with each breath) — becoming more relaxed with each breath.
4. The warm hands: Imagine yourself basking in the warm sun on a beach or soaking in a hot tub until you can actually feel warmth come into your hands. This technique uses the principle that the power of thought directly affects the body. An example of this principle in action is what happens when you’re hungry and begin anticipating your favourite meal. Your mouth automatically starts watering—a physiological response (salivation) caused by a thought. In the same way, the thought of warmth can have a direct effect on circulation. And since we know that the blood flowing out to the extremities is directly linked with relaxation, thoughts of warmth—especially warm hands—will cause an automatic relaxation response.

Practice:

Anticipate the fact that time will fly by. Think of a time right now when you could fit relaxation into your routine and write it into your agenda.

To practice at home, set aside a period of time, preferably at the same time of day (to establish habit), when you will not be disturbed. “Setting the scene” is an important part of the relaxation process. Also, although relaxation is usually not used for sleep disturbances until several practice sessions have occurred, if you fall asleep while practicing, congratulate yourself on your success!

Remember that relaxation is a gift you give yourself.