

## **Types of Relaxation Exercises**

### **JACOBSONIAN RELAXATION (tense/relax):**

The most basic type of relaxation, this exercise is based on the fact that the resting state of muscles after contraction is less tense than before contraction:

Separate muscle groups are tensed and relaxed in turn, in conjunction with breathing. The muscle groups are chosen systematically (i.e., from head to foot or vice versa), and the same routine is followed each time. Although they may be modified, general procedures are as follows:

1. Begin by being aware of breathing. Take several deep breaths (slowly, so as not to hyperventilate).
2. On a deep inhalation, hold the breath and tense the muscle group for a slow count of five. Upon exhalation, release the tension.
3. Take another slow deep breath (without holding), and release residual tension.
4. Breathe in a normal, less deep manner for at least two breaths before tensing again.
5. Repeat at least once for the same muscle group.

The muscle groups should be as small as possible--shoulders, upper arms, lower arms, and hands, for example, rather than just "arms". Right and left sides should be done separately. Some muscle groups should be tensed in more than one way. The mouth can be opened wide or tightly shut; the hands can be balled into fists or splayed open; the stomach can be sucked against the backbone or tensed (as if a bowling ball were going to fall on it); the feet can be flexed or extended. Thoroughly done, this exercise can take several hours. Shortcuts are ok, of course.

### **DEEP MUSCLE RELAXATION**

This exercise is very similar to the Jacobsonian technique, except there is no deliberate tensing of muscles. The breath is not held, but the person relaxes separate muscle groups on exhalation, again moving in a systematic manner throughout the body. Be sure to repeat the relaxation at least 2x per muscle group.

### **AUTOGENIC TRAINING**

This exercise involves self-suggestion and the autonomic nervous system. At one time believed not to be under voluntary control, studies have found that para- and sympathetic functioning is actually quite amenable to conscious intervention.

1. Find a comfortable reclining position.
2. Scan the body for tense or uncomfortable areas, and adjust position or consciously relax that area.

3. Internally repeat the following phrases, allowing at least ten seconds between repetitions and at least ten repetitions per phrase:

**My breathing is smooth and rhythmic.**

**My heartbeat is slow and regular.**

**My stomach is calm and relaxed.**

**Warmth is flowing into my right arm and hand.**

**My right arm and hand are heavy and warm.**

Repeat the last two phrases for **left arm and hand, right leg and foot, left leg and foot**. Then repeat the entire procedure. People can increase the temperature of their extremities by several degrees because of the increased blood flow to the arms and legs. They can actually lower heartrate, muscle tension, and blood pressure when using this exercise.

## **VISUAL IMAGERY**

This exercise allows the most variability and specificity in dealing with tension and anxiety. The person should first do a short version of whichever of the above exercises is most effective, in order to achieve a state of physical and mental relaxation before beginning visual imagery.

The imagery can be as simple as the memory of a favorite relaxing place, or as complex as a detailed journey through a fantasyland, with encounters with multiple characters. It can be as short as 5 minutes or as long as an hour--20-40 minutes is optimal, in my experience. It can deal directly with real-life problems by behavior rehearsal, or speak symbolically to deep personality structures. This type of relaxation exercise is perhaps best approached with a therapist.

### **Comments:**

The first three types of exercise can be done by individuals at home. They may find it helpful to tape record their own or their therapist's voice and then listen to the tape when relaxing, in order to achieve the passive, receptive state that best promotes relaxation.

Deep relaxation can be similar to a trance state. Therapists and patients should be somewhat cautious of the statements made in any of these exercises if the person is susceptible to suggestion. Feedback from the person is very important.

*by Karla Bennion, Ph.D.*