

## Relaxation Techniques and Workshops

As tension increases in most people during the day, it seems only right that one should allow time for relaxation each day, time to tune into sensations and release tension. During this time relaxation techniques could be worked into the daily routine to evoke the relaxation response. Herbert Benson wrote about the relaxation response in 1977 and described it as an innate response within our own bodies. The 'Relaxation Response' reduces heart rate, lowers respiratory rate, decreases oxygen consumption, decreases blood pressure in those with an elevated blood pressure, increases alpha waves - the slow brain waves that are only present when people are relaxed and releases endorphins into the blood stream, decreases metabolism, and decreases sympathetic nervous system activity. Hans Seyle (1976) suggested that exercise and meditation produce chemical changes in the brain that induce neuromuscular relaxation, train the parasympathetic nervous system and provide a distraction from the cause of stress. There are many techniques that can be employed to induce relaxation of mind and body and these are but a few:

Progressive neuromuscular relaxation

Breathing techniques

Quiet sitting with concentration on word, sound, object or image

Stretching to relax

Autogenic training

Yoga

T'ai Chi

Aikido

Massage

Aromatherapy

Reflexology

Shiatsu

Rest and sleep

Active exercise/sport

Creativity - painting, pottery

Theatre, cinema, books, music and rhythm

In order to relax you must reduce muscular tension, reduce mental activity and reduce respiration

and many of the above will bring this about resulting in a relaxed YOU. The nervous system quiets when the muscular system calms resulting in rest and self-care.

For relaxation to occur Benson emphasises the need for a quiet environment, a passive attitude (let it happen), and something to focus attention on.

### Progressive Neuromuscular Relaxation Explanation

The following explanation of PNR has been taken from

<http://faculty.weber.edu/molpin/healthclasses/1110/bookchapters/progressivechapter.htm>

For further reading on the topic please visit the site.

"Many muscles in the body remain in a chronically contracted state because they are continuously receiving the message from the nervous system that they should be contracting in order to fight or run from the big bear. They don't receive the signal from the nervous system that the threat has passed and it is okay to relax. An example of this is often found in a person's shoulders. They might feel tight and sore because these muscles are continually tensed. It was a man named Edmond Jacobson who in 1929 first caught on to this idea of tension and relaxation in the muscles. He was a doctor living in Chicago working with patients who suffered from a variety of maladies. He noticed one common characteristic of nearly all of his patients and that was muscle tension. Working with his patients, he found that they were able to diminish the severity of the disorder as they were able to reduce or relieve muscle tension. Jacobson found that most of his patients had no idea that they had excess muscle tension in various places in their bodies. He found that as his patients were asked to consciously flex these tensed up areas, and then consciously relieve that tension, the contracting muscles would become relaxed. Jacobson understood that a muscle cannot be contracting and relaxing at the same time and by forcibly tensing a muscle and then consciously releasing the contraction, the muscles would naturally return to their naturally relaxed position. Thus was born the relaxation technique called Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR). It has also been called Progressive Neuromuscular Relaxation identifying the autonomic nervous system activity in initiating and turning off muscle tension. Another name for PMR is Active Progressive Relaxation. Progressive relaxation is probably the most commonly used form of relaxation therapy in western society today."

### Progressive Neuromuscular Relaxation

Progressive neuromuscular relaxation emphasises the relaxation of voluntary skeletal muscles, those muscles over which you have conscious control and initiates parasympathetic nervous system activity

by first tensing and consciously releasing tension. This technique seeks to achieve increased control over skeletal muscle (Benson 1977). All thoughts occur with collateral skeletal muscle activity. Therefore learning to differentiate between states of tension in your body can help you to release muscular tension rather than allowing it to build to a chronic state. Progressive relaxation aims to turn off the stress response and evoke the relaxation response

Make yourself comfortable either lying or sitting in recline but be aware that there is a greater chance of falling asleep if lying down. However, if working with large groups lying down with eyes closed limits the distractions and allows the members of the group to become present with their own sensations. When working on a one-to-one basis it may be possible to sit and leave eyes open but unfocused.

If lying let the feet fall open, thighs relax, arms down by sides with the back of the hand on the floor. Or alternatively hands can lie side by side on your abdomen. Do not intertwine the fingers. Take some time to insure you are comfortable and use cushions to support areas of the body that may be painful. Once you are comfortable and able to remain still begin the following:

Breath out.. Sigh.. Let the body go loose.

Depending on the time available you can shortcut through many of the following. For example rather than the feet, calves, thighs you could just tighten and release the legs. So PMR can be tailored to suit your needs.

\*Where 'hold' is used and '....' is used between words hold tightness for 3 to 8 seconds

\*\* Where release or relax is used, release the contraction slowly and allow 20/30 seconds to go by before moving on to the next stage thus allowing practitioners time to tune into sensations and release tension.

Curl up your toes... Wriggle them out... And relax them Press your heels into the floor tightening your feet..hold... and release Tighten your calf muscles... hold... and release

Now the muscles from the knees down are loose and heavy. Let the feet roll out and the calf muscles relax.

Tighten the thigh muscles...hold...and release Tighten the bum muscles... hold... and release Press your back into the floor, tightening your tummy muscles...hold... and let go.

Now from the waist down the body is relaxed. The feet fall open, the thighs roll out, bum and tummy is relaxed.

Tighten your hands, make a fist... stretch the fingers out... and relax the backs of the hands on the floor beside you. Tighten your arms...raise them off the floor and release arms and hands Raise your shoulders up to your ears.. hold.. stretch them down by your sides.. far as you can go.. and release

Tighten your chest muscles...hold....and release Press your shoulders into the floor while stretching your chest up.. hold.. and relax

Now from the neck down your body feels loose and heavy. Shoulders are relaxed, arms and hands are relaxed, chest and upper back muscles are loose, tummy and lower back muscles are loose, bum muscles have let go, thighs roll out, calf muscles are relaxed and feet fall out and away from the centre line of the body.

Lift your head up and bring your chin onto your chest..hold..and lower your head slowly to the floor. Press the back of your head against the floor..hold and release. (If neck muscles get very tight during this stage, release the muscles by moving your head from side to side.) Tighten your mouth..hold... now stretch your mouth as if you were yawning..hold.. and release. Do not close the mouth up but leave the jaw relaxed. Make sure you are not clenching your teeth together. Make sure your tongue is not up against the roof of your mouth but relaxed down behind your lower teeth. Move your jaw from side to side to release any tension and relax the lower part of your face. Tighten your eyes..squeeze them tight..release and stretch your eyebrows up.. and let go. Feel the skin on your forehead smoothen out.. feel the skin on your scalp smoothen out and let your whole body go loose

Your face and head are relaxed... Your neck and shoulders are relaxed... Your arm and hands are relaxed... Your chest and upper back muscles are loose... Your tummy and lower back muscles are loose... Your bum muscles have let go... Your thigh muscles are relaxed and roll out... Your calf muscles are relaxed... Your feet and toes are relaxed and the feet fall out and away from the centre line of the body.

All of your body is loose and heavy.. Keep your focus on the sensations of letting go.. relaxing...  
Releasing

### Body Scanning

Progressive Neuromuscular Relaxation teaches you to differentiate between tension and relaxation in your muscles. Once this has been learnt it may not be necessary for you to continue to tense and relax the muscle groups in order to achieve a relaxed body. It may now only be necessary for you to scan your body using the final exercise in the PMR above:

Your face and head are relaxed

Your neck and shoulders are relaxed

Your arm and hands are relaxed

Your chest and upper back muscles are loose

Your tummy and lower back muscles are loose

Your bum muscles have let go

Your thigh muscles are relaxed and roll out

Your calf muscles are relaxed

Your feet and toes are relaxed and the feet fall out and away from the centre line of the body.

All of your body is loose and heavy.. Keep your focus on the sensations of letting go.. relaxing..  
Releasing

Should you become aware of areas of the body that are having difficulties letting go, focus on the area and breathe into it. Imagine your breath energy smoothing out the tension. Should thoughts and images come into your mind as to why you are having difficulty relaxing the area, acknowledge them but set them aside. It may be as a result of an old injury. It may be a habitual holding of a body area for protection against physical or mental stressors. Whatever the cause, now is not the time to analyse it. Now is the time to release it and achieve muscular and mental relaxation.

### Autogenic Training

Dr. Schultz, a German neurologist developed autogenic training around the same time as Jacobson developed progressive muscular relaxation. Dr. Malcolm Carruthers popularised the technique in the 1970's. It is aimed at self-induced deep relaxation. It employs self-suggestion to influence some part of the body, using sensations of heaviness, warmth, calmness and strength in pulse. It is based on the three R's - reduced muscular tension, reduced mental tension and reduced respiration. It can be added to the progressive relaxation at the start but once you have become experienced at tuning into your tense areas and letting them go then it can be added to body scanning.

What parts of your body are touching the floor? Allow heaviness to enter your limbs/your body and let yourself sink into the floor.

Become aware of your breath. Is it a smooth breath? Let it travel slowly into your body and empty slowly. Draw calmness into your body with your breath and let tension breathe out. With each in breath draw in patience, kindness and calmness. With each out breath breathe out worry, doubts and fears. Fill the body with calmness and compassion, let it flow through you, soothing out any aches, pains, tensions... Allow your calming breathe to surround the area that is having difficulty letting go. Be kind and easy with yourself.

Enjoy the waves of relaxation that flow over you...

Rest..

### Breathing Techniques

Concentration on breathing is a very good way of achieving presence or mindfulness. It creates an internal focus and a quietening of the mind. There are many active and passive exercises that use breathing techniques and these are but a few.

Stand, feet shoulder width apart to give you a solid base, knees soft, back straight, tummy in and arms by your side. Slowly and smoothly raise your arms overhead while breathing in..hold.. and slowly breathe out as you lower the arms back down by your sides. Repeat three/four times. Progress this exercise by raising up onto your toes as you breathe in and raise your arms..hold...and return to standing with the out breath.

Stand as above but with arms stretched out in front of you. Draw hands in towards chest, palms facing in as you breathe in..slowly breathe out while pushing palms away.

Stand as above but with arms hanging down with fingers intertwined in front of you. As you breathe in raise your intertwined hands to chest height, breathe out while pushing palms back down. Breathe back in while raising arms in a frontal raise to overhead, unlock hands and breathe out while lowering arms to sides.

Abdominal breathing: Lie down, place your hands on your abdomen a little below your bellybutton. Become aware of the rise and fall of your hands as you breathe. Keep your awareness there for 10 breaths. Imagine your belly as a furnace. As you breathe in you are stoking the fire and as you breathe out the heat energy flows right to the tips of your fingers and toes. This heat energy is very healing. Direct it to any area of your body that needs it.

To become aware of the difference in shallow breathing and deep breathing try the following. Place your hands just below your collarbone and only breath in until your hands rise. You will experience this as a short sharp breath similar to the type of breath we associate with a fright. Now try placing your hands on your ribcage and filling only the ribcage with the breath. Again feel the restriction.

Complete Breath: As you breathe in slowly fill the abdomen first, then the ribcage and then to the tips of the lungs by raising the shoulders..hold..slowly release by emptying the abdomen, ribcage and tips of the lungs in that order. Repeat. This complete breath can be performed lying, sitting, standing or with the hand movements outlined above.

Alternate nostril breathing: As you breathe in close off one nostril, hold breathe in by closing off both nostrils and then release breath by releasing other nostril. Breathe back in on that side..hold..and release from the first side. Repeat slowly.

### Quite Sitting

Taoism, Buddhism, Zen, T.M. all employ quiet sitting to meditate. The techniques that I outline here are summarized from the work of Herbert Benson who studied meditation as a means of reducing stress and evoking the relaxation response. He emphasised the need for four pre-requisites

A quiet environment with as few distractions as possible

An object to dwell on - a mental device - to shift the mind from externally oriented thoughts. It can be a positive word like love, joy, peace.. a sound.. an object to gaze at such as the flame of a candle, a picture, a quiet place in nature, a flower

A passive attitude - distracting thoughts will occur, acknowledge them, set them aside to be dealt with later. Reaffirm that this is not the time to deal with these external events. This is the time for you to quieten your mind. With practice you will focus for longer periods.. return to your mental device. Some other techniques you can employ here include passive awareness - watching your thoughts as if watching television, acknowledging them with a degree of detachment. However, these thoughts may lead to muscular tension. Watch your breath. Give it a colour. Watch it enter and leave - maybe use two colours, one for the in breathe and one for the out breathe. Meditate on a core theme that is meaningful to you on the day. Breathe in patience, calmness, lightness, compassion, peace, forgiveness...It is hard to relax if one feels hurt, anxious, resentful or hard done by. Negativity can cause the emotional tensions that lead to being stressed. Do your best to make your peace with the world and let go of the negative emotions with the out breathe

A comfortable position - to prevent muscular tension you should be comfortable and relaxed. This may be a cross-legged sitting position on the floor, on a seat, the lotus position, kneeling, lying. If sitting keep the back straight and the arms relaxed. Take in a few deep breaths and think relax, let go, release.. Breathe slowly and rhythmically

### Visualization

Dr. Carl Simonton et al. (1993) stated that learning to use mental guidance to produce physical relaxation should help strengthen our belief that we can use our minds to support our bodies. People can create mental images of desired states and events. By forming a mental image a person makes a clear mental statement of what he or she wants to happen. As a result of this positive expectation the person begins to act in ways consistent with achieving the desired outcome and helps to bring it about (concept of self-fulfilling prophecy). Visualization is about using your imagination, filling your head with pictures, day-dreaming with a purpose.. Picture a favourite place, a happy scene from your past, a beach, a forest, a garden, a tree. Build up a picture of your favourite place - colours, objects, people. Only place those objects there that you want. Only allow the people you want into your vision - or nobody at all. This is your safe, secure place. It is totally within your control. Go there when you need to relax at any time of the day.

Use visualization to aid recovery from illness. Picture your illness as a soft ball inside you. Gather all of the illness into this soft ball and then with the out breathe blow it far away from you, watch it disappear over the horizon.

Imagine your belly as a furnace. As you breathe in you are stoking the fire and as you breathe out the heat energy flows right to the tips of your fingers and toes. This heat energy gathers up the illness and brings it back into the furnace to be destroyed. Watch the fire destroy the illness and ease the body.

### Stretch and Relax

A body in a tense state expends energy inefficiently. By relaxing your muscles you can extend your staying power. The more relaxed your muscles the more flexible you are. The more flexible you are the more efficiently you use energy. " By bringing about stretching and relaxation in different muscle groups overall balance of posture is maintained in a very economical way with very little expenditure of energy and practically no fatigue" (Mc Laren 1984). The stretches used are not as important as the speed of execution. When relaxation is the goal then gentle, slow smooth movements should be used. Be sure all exercises are safe and appropriate for the group you are working with.

Standing:

Balance on one leg, fix eyes on a spot ahead of you (crane stance)

Balance on one leg, lace second foot on side of opposite knee with arms overhead, palms of hands together

Standing quadriceps stretch holding onto the ankle

Standing adductor stretch

Standing erector spinea stretch

Half squats with hold and recover

Side bends

Standing twist - keep hips forward while twisting upper body - arms outstretched

Sitting:

Double leg clasp with relaxed knees and bringing chest to knee (keep head up)

Abductor stretch - hugging knee to chest with foot outside the straight leg

Abductor stretch - pushing knee away with elbow while twisting to look over shoulder

Chest expansion

Overhead latissimus dorsi stretch

Posture clasp or triceps stretch

Shoulder stretches - forward, overhead or across body

Head/neck stretches - ear to shoulder, chin to shoulder and look behind you, chin to chest and raise chin with mouth closed to lengthen front of neck.

Twist seated - body upright

Twist seated bringing opposite hand to opposite foot and looking up

Adductor stretch seated with soles of feet together and knees dropping out

Alternate leg pulls chest to thigh

Alternate leg pulls with side bend

Lying:

Hamstring stretch

Oblique and abductor stretch - lying with arms outstretched, keep shoulders on the floor while taking bent knee across body towards floor

As above with straight leg

Back raise with pelvic tilt - roll back down one vertebrae at a time

Lying on side - side leg raise and hold

Lying on side - quadriceps stretch

Lying on tummy raise one leg at a time, keeping knee straight

Lying on tummy raise alternate leg and arm and hold

Cobra - onto forearms - look straight ahead

### Staying relaxed through the day

Many people ask "How can I stay relaxed during the day when it is not appropriate to leave the desk/the job and take a long break to engage in relaxation techniques?" Here are some suggestions:

At work:

Use background music that has a slow beat and a calming effect.

Tackle the most unpalatable jobs first

Keep your workspace tidy and be organized

Keep a diary and plan the day

Be punctual

Set goals for the day, the week, the month etc..

Stretch at your desk and close your eyes while doing so. This relaxes the body and gives you an eye break if you are a computer user or have to concentrate on print for long periods of time.

Ensure you have a comfortable chair if you sit for a lot of your day

Have plants in the workspace to rest your eyes on during the day

Become aware of your posture and unwind - uncross legs, unfold arms, drop shoulders, stretch chest

Tune into how you are feeling and acknowledge the feelings and why they are there

Use auto-suggestion to counteract panic, anxiety, and ebbing confidence

Walk tall, with good posture and breathe deeply

Do not rush about but move with purpose

During your break or during lunchtime:

Spend a few minutes of your break in the fresh air. Go for a brisk walk for even five minutes.

Find a quiet place and sit quietly for just a few minutes.

Listen to sounds, count your breaths, be alone

Take a power nap at your desk by performing a body scan and stretching out those areas of your body that have tensed during the morning

Cut out unnecessary talking and movement for a specific period of time

Treat yourself to something within your means

General:

Do not take too much on for a day. The work and the home duties may be enough. Do not try to fit the shopping in too!

Time manage

Prioritise and review priorities regularly - do they still apply or do they need to be reset

Change practical arrangements like childminding, housekeeping, route to work to avoid traffic jams, work hours to avoid rush-hour etc..

Change behaviour: smile more, sit somewhere new during class, or the tea break, praise people's work when it is praiseworthy

Learn to say 'No' if you already have enough on your plate

Be flexible - see options and alternatives and give them a try

Reward yourself when you have achieved the end of a project, semester, course successfully