

Patient information

Chronic pain self-management Relaxation

Stress and the benefits of relaxation

Stress is often spoken of in very negative terms but we all need a certain level of stress to function properly. It only becomes a problem when the amount of stress or pressure feels greater than our ability to cope with it.

People with chronic pain often highlight the feeling of lack of control over their pain as one of the most stressful aspects of their condition.

The amount of stress you feel maybe influenced by three things:

- The stressful situation
- How you see the problem and your ability to cope with it
- The support available from others

Stress has an impact on our activities, our thoughts and our feelings but, by considering the three points above, you can learn to manage your stress by:

- Dealing with the cause of your stress
- Changing the way you look at the problem
- Asking for help from family and friends

Stress and pressure are a normal part of life but, when you have chronic pain, they can make it harder to deal with the problems caused by that chronic pain.

Practicing relaxation

Relaxation is a feeling of being calm.

Learning to relax involves recognising tension in the body and mind and letting go of that tension.

We know people with chronic pain can experience a lot of muscle spasm or tension as a response to their pain.

Relaxation can be very helpful in relieving muscle tension and reducing stress. It is a very important coping strategy. If you successfully learn to relax your pain maybe reduced.

Relaxation skills can take a long time to learn and should be practiced every day and more frequently if you are experiencing a flare up.

Relaxation can:

- Reduce the feelings of stress - helping us to gain more control.
- Reduce pain - by decreasing muscle tension, aches and pains.
- Releases endorphins ('the body's natural pain-killers') to relieve pain.
- Promote sleep - allow the body to rest peacefully and calm the mind. As you begin to implement the techniques you may well find that your sleep pattern improves, due to a more helpful balance of rest and activity throughout the day.

You may also have your own way of relaxing, such as having an enjoyable long bath, massage, aromatherapy or yoga.

Relaxation is a skill which needs to be learnt and will improve with practice. Initially the aim is to relax in a quiet environment where you feel comfortable and free from distraction. The techniques, once established, can then be used in alternative environments, for example, at work or on the bus.

Relaxation techniques

Simple exercises - these can be practiced anywhere:

- 1 Take one good deep breath

- 2 Keep breathing slowly and deeply
- 3 Let your shoulders droop
- 4 Relax your hands

Square breathing

This technique involves using your breath whilst at the same time visualising the sequence of your breathing as a square. Each whole breath can be seen as:

- 1 The in breath
- 2 A pause as you hold your breath
- 3 The out breath
- 4 And a pause before you start the next breath

Each stage in the sequence can be visualised as a side of the square:

- 1 Start by having a small pause where you relax your shoulders etc., at this stage you can visualise the bottom of the square.
- 2 Breathe in to the count of two whilst visualising a side of the square.
- 3 Hold your breath for the count of one whilst visualising the top of the square.
- 4 Then breathe out to the count of two whilst visualising the last side of the square.

Only do this technique for a maximum of one minute at a time.

Elephants

- 1 Take a breath in to the count of saying the word 'elephant' to yourself twice;
- 2 Hold the breath to the count of saying 'elephant' to yourself once;
- 3 Then breathe out to the count of saying 'elephant' to yourself three times.

Sand

Imagine that you have a grain of sand between your forefinger and your thumb. In order to stop yourself from dropping this grain of sand you have to keep rotating it between your finger and thumb. Allow yourself some time to just focus on the movement of your finger and thumb (approximately thirty seconds to a minute) and then count how many rotations of this grain of sand you can fit into a whole breath; that is a breath in and a breath out.

Please note that you can do this technique for a short period of time, say one minute, or for longer if you wish. As an alternative, you may wish to replace the rotating movement of your finger and thumb with light tapping movements.

Deep muscle relaxation

This takes about 10 minutes.

1 Get prepared

- a. Find somewhere quiet, perhaps with some soothing music.
- b. Make yourself comfortable – sitting in a chair or lying down.
- c. Close your eyes and breathe deeply.
- d. Relax your body and let it go all loose and floppy.

2 Relax your muscles

As you breathe in and out, relax all the major muscle groups in turn starting with your feet. Is there any tension? If there is release it and relax, at the same time saying 'my feet feel calm and relaxed'. Do this three times then move up to your calves, bottom and so on.

Calm your thoughts

Distract your mind by thinking about a relaxation, pleasant scene or playing some soothing music.

For example: Imagine that you are in the countryside on a sunny summer afternoon. Imagine that you are slowly walking on your own through a field

You can feel the warmth of the sun streaming down from the blue sky. You can see the grass, the trees and the flowers in the field.

You can hear the birds singing and in the distance you can hear children's voices. Feel the ground beneath you as you walk and walk slowly, looking at everything around you. Think about what you can see, hear, smell and touch. Focus all of your thoughts on this scene and remove any other thoughts or worries which may come to your mind. Spend five minutes fully relaxed, physically and mentally.

When you finish a session of relaxation and want to get up, count backwards from four to one.

Breathing

When you are in pain the way that you breathe is very important. This may sound strange, as breathing is something you don't normally think about. However, when you are in pain your breathing pattern may change, this can lead to tension. We know that tension can make your pain worse. The exercise below can help you to think about your breathing, making sure it is slow and relaxed - relieving the tension.

The diaphragm is a band of muscle just below your lungs, which helps you to breathe by moving up and down, forcing air in and out of the lungs.

There is a technique in which you deliberately use your diaphragm to control your breathing called diaphragmatic breathing.

- 1 Make sure you are comfortable.
- 2 Make sure that your back is well supported and put one hand on your upper chest and the other on your stomach. This will help you to feel when your stomach/chest moves.
- 3 Close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing.
- 4 Notice how quickly you are breathing and try and slow it down.
- 5 Take a long, slow, relaxed breath in through your nose. Push your stomach out (this helps your lungs to fill up) and feel the air gliding slowly down into your lungs.
- 6 Hold your breath for a few seconds, then slowly breathe out through your mouth, with your lips slightly parted. Let your stomach fall – this helps get rid of the air from your lungs.
- 7 Repeat

- 8 Think about your neck and shoulders – is there any tension there? If there is, bring your shoulders up towards your ears, then slowly lower them back down, loosening any tension.
- 9 Check for feelings of tension anywhere else in your body.
- 10 Focus on your breathing again, taking slow, relaxed breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. Imagine the tension flowing away with every breath out.

Remember

Using relaxation is a reliable and positive method of making progress in managing your pain.

- It makes you feel good.
- It helps you to sleep naturally.
- It becomes more effective the more you use it.
- Stick with it!

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