

Quick relaxation

Tips to help you relax on the spot

You may not always have time to go through some of the deep relaxation methods taught on the Cardiovascular Rehabilitation Programme when you are getting stressed. For example, you may feel stressed when you are waiting for an appointment or sitting in a traffic jam.

At times like these, on-the-spot techniques can help to lessen your stress quickly. These techniques will help you deal with the stressful situation and get on with your daily life in as relaxed a state as possible.

Advantages of on-the-spot stress relief

- Convenient and short enough to be used in most situations
- You won't draw attention to yourself
- You can use them without interrupting your activities.

The emergency stop technique

The following technique may help you to cope immediately with a stressful situation until you have time for further relaxation:

1. Acknowledge you are feeling stressed and recognise the feelings.
2. Say "STOP!" to yourself sharply (aloud if the situation permits) - this means stop fussing and getting so worked up.
3. Breathe in and hold your breath for a moment. Generally you shouldn't pause between breathing in and out but in this sort of emergency it may help – do not hold your breath for more than two or three seconds.

4. Breathe out slowly and as you do so, relax your shoulders and hands.
5. Pause for a moment and then breathe in again.
6. As you breathe out slowly this time, relax your forehead, face and jaw.
7. Stay quiet for a few seconds, then go on with whatever you were doing but move smoothly and slowly.
8. If you have to talk, speak a little more slowly and with your voice a little lower than usual.

This emergency relaxation technique can usually be done without anyone noticing. You will find that in spite of your feelings the tension will ease.

Saying positive phrases

Phrases that can help you feel more relaxed include the following examples:

- I feel at peace.
- I am relaxed.
- I am calm and composed.
- My thoughts are peaceful ones.

However, the most effective phrases are those which you make up yourself and use when you feel stressed. Having a picture in your mind of being your full height can help you feel more confident and at ease. Try using phrases such as “Think TALL, think UP”.

Other on-the-spot approaches

By making small changes to how we hold our body, we can relieve stress. Try the following when you are sitting comfortably with your back supported by a chair, feet flat on the floor and your hands resting on your thighs:

Spread your fingers

Start by making your fingers and thumbs long. Hold them there for a moment. Then stop. Let them relax into a gently curved position.

Relax your mouth

Start by dragging your jaw downwards. Feel your jaw hanging down inside your mouth. Then stop. Feel your throat slack, your tongue loose and your lips gently touching.

Pull your shoulders towards your feet

Feel a distance growing between your shoulders and your ears. Then stop pulling and let your shoulders rest where they are.

Push your head back

With your shoulders pulled down, lift your head. Carry it up and back, keeping your chin pointing towards your feet. Now stop - the resulting position should feel comfortable.

Loosen your arm and shoulder muscles

Shake your sleeve down – you can do this without being noticed.

Stretch

Try 'unlocking' structures which have been held in one position for some length of time by twisting or arching your back, crouching or bending over.

'Scan' your body for tension

Take a brief tour of your body, checking each part of your body in turn for tension. Feel yourself letting the tension go in each part.

Relaxation by counting

Relax your body as you count:

One, two (arms relax). Three, four (head and neck relax). Five, six (trunk relax). Seven, eight (legs relax). Nine, ten (whole body relaxes).

Behavioural relaxation checklist

Remember – if you look relaxed, you feel relaxed:

- feet – resting with toes lying free
- hands – fingers gently curled
- body – without movement
- shoulders – dropped and level
- head – still, and facing forwards
- mouth – teeth separated, lips unpursed
- throat – loose
- breathing – slow and gentle
- voice – no sound
- eyes – lightly closed behind smooth eyelids.

Sweeping the body

This technique helps release body tension. You need to imagine you have a large, soft paintbrush.

Starting at your feet, imagine you are sweeping the brush up your legs and the front of your body as far as your shoulders ... then down your arms to your fingertips ... then a long sweep up the full length of the back ... continuing into the neck and scalp ... over your brow ... and down to your face and jaw.

The ripple

Think about a single wave of relaxation beginning at your head and rolling down to your feet.

Starting at the top of your head, feel the relaxation rolling down your body in one continuous wave. Feel it releasing tension as it descends, relaxing each part of your body in turn until it reaches the tips of your toes.

Try synchronizing the ripple with a slow breath out.

Breathing

By thinking carefully about slowing down your breathing you may be able to counteract the effects of your body's 'fight or flight' response (see our [Stress management](#) leaflet for more information). The following tips are more likely to work if you start them before your state of stress becomes established.

Abdominal breathing

Breathing from the abdomen tends to be more calming than taking shallow breaths in the upper rib area. Let your attention focus on your abdomen. Feel it swelling

as you breathe in and sinking as you breathe out. Keep your breathing as gentle and slow as you can.

A breathing cycle

Breathe out a little more fully than usual. Let the air flow in to fill your lungs. Hold it briefly. Then exhale slowly. As you let the air out, feel the tension going with it. Then, let your breathing recover its normal rhythm.

Cue-controlled relaxation

By repeatedly associating a word such as 'relax' with being relaxed the word can become a cue. This means that when you say the word as you breathe out, it can make you feel more relaxed.

Let your breathing be as natural as possible ... just before you begin to breathe out, think the word 'relax' ... slowly release the air as you focus on the word ... breathe in ... and repeat the sequence ... keep the rhythm as gentle as you can ... avoid deliberately deepening the breaths ... continue for a few moments. A shorter version might run: In ... relax and out slowly ... in ... relax and out slowly.

Cognitive strategies

These strategies help us deal with stress by changing the way we think and therefore feel. Positive thoughts tend to generate positive feelings. If you often repeat phrases about how much you value yourself, you can feel more positive about yourself. Feeling in control and feeling relaxed will tend to increase coping powers whatever the source of the stress.

Phrases tending to promote a sense of control over the situation include:

- I am competent.
- I am in control.
- I can deal with this.
- My coping powers are good.

Acknowledgements

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