

Relaxation

Some ideas from the Counselling Service

This leaflet describes a way of helping with a common problem we are all likely to face – that of feeling tense or stressed. Sometimes this is related to difficulties in our personal lives or pressures at work or university, but, while the causes may be complex, it can be useful to think about how we carry tensions within ourselves and our bodies and how we can actively develop ways of improving our sense of well being. Tension which continues over a long period can end up affecting our health.

How do we know if we are tense?

Strangely, we can be so habitually tense that we accept our tense state as normal. (And it is true that a certain degree of tension can help motivate us to get on with a task.) The following are some of the symptoms which may identify undue tension:

- muscular tension, aches and pains
- difficulties with sleeping
- loss of appetite, stomach upsets
- persistent tiredness, exhaustion
- headaches, migraines
- hyperventilating, shallow breathing
- inability to concentrate or think straight
- a sense of things crowding in, feeling rushed and panicky.

These symptoms can also be caused by other medical problems, so if you are unsure, you may wish to check this out with your doctor.

What we can do about this

There is no single or right way of relaxing – it is a matter of finding an approach which makes sense and works for you. Many people find that listening to music or taking exercise can help them relax. Learning to focus on and relax muscles in all areas of your body helps let go of the tensions. Relaxing your mind, meditation, yoga are also potential ways of reducing tension. It is important to accept that whichever method you select takes time and practice in order for you to gain some ongoing benefit and you will need to build it into your everyday life.

A simple relaxation technique

Here is one method, which takes about ten minutes, that involves relaxing your muscles. (This method involves lying down, but could also be adapted to a sitting position and everyday situations.) By focusing in your mind's eye on specific areas of the body, without actually 'doing' anything, you can send messages to your brain enabling you to release tensions.

- lie on your back on a firm surface, (or sit comfortably in a chair), with your feet firmly on the ground, and your eyes closed. Place paperback books under your head to support it comfortably
- to begin with, focus on the weight on your head on the books, allowing your head to rest on them
- allow your face to soften and your eyes to relax. Let your tongue rest on the bottom of your mouth and feel your jaw let go of the tension
- let your neck soften and imagine your neck lengthening and your head releasing away from the spine
- travelling down your body, become aware of your shoulder blades and allow the front of your shoulders to drop down and soften; feel the weight of your shoulders on the floor
- travel down your arms to your elbows; allow your elbows to soften, and on to your wrists
- become aware of your hands and without moving your fingers, allow each finger to be released
- travel back to your chest, allowing it to soften become aware of your breathing and sense the flow of air deep into and out of your body; breathing rhythmically, without making any effort, allow your breath to fill the space inside your body
- going back to your shoulders, and travelling down your spine, feel the length and breadth of your back
- move down to where the back joins the pelvis and release the joints; imagine the pelvis opening out, with the floor supporting it; travel down to the thighs and feel the knees opening out

- become aware of letting go of the tension in your calves and your ankles softening; move on into the heels of your feet placed firmly on the ground, imagine the arches opening, soften the balls of your feet and visualise each toe uncurling
- travel from your toes through the length of your body up to the top of your head allowing yourself to breathe freely, and rest awhile in this position
- when you are ready to 'return' from this exercise, if in a lying position, roll over onto your front and slowly move from all fours to your two feet and gently uncurl to an upright position

Relaxation and sleep

Learning to relax may not lead to sleep, although you could use an exercise like the one described above to help you sleep more restfully. Other suggestions which may help you with sleeping are:

- give yourself some 'winding down' time before you go to bed, develop a bedtime routine
- don't use your bed as a workplace during the day, and put your work out of sight of your bed.
- try to give your mind a rest
- it can be very difficult to sleep if thoughts are constantly going round in your head. You could try the following:
 - first use the relaxation technique described above
 - with your eyes gently closed, look straight ahead and 'stare into space', as if looking at a distant, unmoving spot; just keep looking at this distant black spot
 - if your thoughts still won't stop, try focusing on your breathing and gently slow it down.

When you could use some additional support

If you think that your tension and stress is related to underlying and unresolved emotional issues in your life, you might find it useful to talk to one of the counsellors.

How to contact the Counselling and Mental Health Service

Please see website for up-to-date service details:
<http://unihub.mdx.ac.uk/cmh>

The UniHelp Desk will be happy to tell you where to find the Counselling service or you can contact us at:
cmh@mdx.ac.uk

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