

TIP SHEET FOR RELAXATION

Where can I get help from others?

- Talk to a counsellor at the Newcastle campus (4921 5801) or at the Central Coast campus (4348 4060).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.
- Join a yoga, meditation or relaxation class. If there are no classes at your tertiary institution, consider courses held in your local community.

What other resources are available?

Websites

The following websites have links to audio files which you can download. There are four relaxation exercises offered on each link, varying from about 5-30 minutes.

www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/counselling/self_help2/relaxation

www.usyd.edu.au/stuserv/counselling/resource.shml

CDs/ DVDs

Petrea King 'Golden Light Meditation' or 'Learning to Meditate', or 'Soar like an Eagle' or look at her website www.questforlife.com.au

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Relaxation & Stress – what's the right balance for me?

Stress is part of everyday life. It is so common that sometimes we are unaware of our own levels of stress and accept living with high tension as 'normal'. However, it is important to learn how you experience stress and what your own signals may be that you are stressed. Headaches, irritability, aching muscles, changes in eating habits, hyperventilation, procrastination, sleeping difficulties and feeling constantly rushed or anxious can all be signs that you are stressed. They could also be signs of a physical health problem so you may want to check this out with your doctor.

Mild stress can be a powerful motivator in the short-term, but feeling stressed over a longer period of time can cause problems for both your physical and mental wellbeing. It can be really helpful to look at the ways in which you relax and add to the relaxation techniques that you may already be using. Experiment with some additional relaxation techniques and then keep practising the ones that suit you best!

While the causes of stress may be complex and varied, such as relationship troubles, study or financial problems, time pressures – the techniques to relax and de-stress can be simple to learn. Below are some suggestions to help you begin to develop a relaxation routine which you enjoy and will want to practise.

Remember that physical exercise is significant in managing stress, due to the release of tension-reducing chemicals. This is why regular exercise (at least 30 minutes, three times per week) is very beneficial. Physical exercise can be the best way to start reducing stress levels.

What can I do to help myself?

Develop your own relaxation practice

There are many different types of relaxation techniques. They can involve breathing control, visualizations, tensing and relaxing muscle groups, listening to music or focusing the mind. Try out several techniques until you are clear what you like and then use the relaxation routine that works for you.

For any relaxation exercise, you will need to be comfortable. Any of the following will help you to be comfortable – find one that suits you. Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor and hands resting on your knees with palms facing upwards. Or lie on your back on the floor with your feet slightly apart and arms close to, but not touching, your sides, with palms upwards. Or lie on your back with your legs drawn up so that your knees are

resting gently against one another and your feet are turned inwards and slightly splayed apart.

If you are very stressed it may be very difficult to use relaxation practices without assistance. If you find your level of tension is high and you cannot relax, consider counselling.

Some examples of Relaxation techniques

Breathing

- When you are stressed, you use far less of your lung capacity to breathe. Your breaths are shallow. A simple exercise you can try is to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. The idea behind most breathing exercises is to keep the breath slow and deep and regular.

The following three ideas are breathing exercises you can try at different times to see what works for you. They may also give you some other ideas that you can try.

- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, counting slowly to 5 with each breath in and out. Do this 10 times.
- Breathe in and out regularly and hold your breath for 3 counts after each inhalation and exhalation. Do this 10 times.
- Sit with your hands clenched in your lap, palms turned upwards. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly and, as you breathe out, uncurl your thumb on one hand. Repeat and uncurl the next finger. Keep repeating until you have uncurled all your fingers for both hands and are sitting with relaxed, open hands in your lap.

Visualisations

- Visualisations can help to increase the state of relaxation. Choose an image which you find calming. You may want to imagine a garden, or waterfall, a mountain or a beach. Perhaps you would like to have the soothing object in front of you: a flower, candle flame, or any other beautiful object (not a photograph of your latest love!)
- You can incorporate visualisation with your breathing by giving your breath a colour and watch it flow gently in and out of your body. You can imagine the air coming to you like a light which energises you as it fills you up. Or you can visualise as you breathe out, you are breathing out tension as a colour and becoming more and more relaxed.
- Other visualisations involve transformations: for example, watching twisted ropes untwisting or hard wax becoming soft and warm as it melts or frozen water thawing and flowing gently over rocks.

Progressive muscle relaxation

- This method involves focusing on different parts of the body and relaxing your muscles. Some people like to tense that area as they think about it and then relax it; others prefer just to concentrate the mind on relaxing that muscle group without tensing at all. You decide which method suits you best. Read through this exercise. You may want to record your voice as you talk your way through the exercise until you become more familiar with it. Where there are spaces marked with - these are places to pause.
- Lie on the floor or sit comfortably in a chair. Make sure that you won't be disturbed for at least 10 minutes. Try to reduce light and sound disturbances. Close your eyes and have the intention that you will allow yourself this time to practise relaxation. There will be sounds that intrude into your relaxation. Simply notice the sounds, but don't focus on them by thinking about them or trying to make sense of them.

- Begin with your face... notice any tension... and be aware of allowing your face to relax...think about the muscles around your eyes... mouth... nose... forehead... let the tongue rest heavily in the jaw... relax the jawline...focus on the back of the head and the neck...be aware of any tension in this area...and intend to let it go...and now your shoulders...notice the tension...you may want to relax by drawing your shoulders downwards towards your knees...and then allowing them to adjust to a comfortable position...push the shoulders away again...and relax them...and now your shoulder blades and upper back...and lower back...focus your attention on these areas...feel them sink into the floor or back of the chair...as you allow them to get heavier...and heavier...more and more relaxed...now travel further down the body...noticing your chest and your tummy...relaxing all the muscles in this area...turn your attention to your arms...front of the arms...back of the arms...elbows...wrists...each finger...your thumbs...and let your arms soften and feel heavy...as they sink gently...gently into the floor/chair...and now your legs...concentrate your attention on your legs...the front of the legs...the back of your legs...top of the thighs...knees...behind the knees...shins...ankles...allow each area to become more and more relaxed...as you travel slowly and gently...down the body...to your feet...think about your feet...front of the foot...arch and sole of each foot...each toe...visualise each toe becoming more relaxed...softening and uncurling...now notice any remaining tension in the body...let it go...allow your self to feel heavier...and heavier...more and more relaxed...(you may want to introduce some music at this stage, or perhaps a visualisation or breathing exercise)...when you are ready...begin to focus the mind on noises outside the room...and when you are ready...slowly stretch...and feel great that you have completed your relaxation...and come into a standing position as gently as you can.

Mindfulness

- Mindfulness is a meditation technique derived from eastern practices where you try to be present in the moment, compassionate and non-judgemental towards yourself and others. By being present-centred you avoid the regrets associated with the past and the anxieties of the future.
- Mindfulness of breath involves observing your breath while not trying to control it. Sit and notice your breath...gently close your eyes...feel the air pass your nostrils... as it flows in and out...turn your attention fully to your breathing...notice outside sounds and let them pass...being aware just of the rhythm of your breath...for a couple of minutes...
- You may also practice mindful eating where you turn off the TV and sit at a table with the food in front of you. Focus your complete attention on the food. Watch yourself place food on the fork. Notice how the food feels in your mouth. Take your time with the meal. Mindful walking follows similar principles. Notice the pressure of the ball of your foot as you take each step. Focus on your body moving through space. Any event may become mindful if you choose to slow down, concentrate on the activity and practise staying completely present in that particular moment.

These are just some ideas that may be helpful. Remember that learning new skills take time – be patient and keep practising. We wish you the best of luck in your efforts to reduce your stress levels through relaxation. If you find any other techniques which are particularly useful, please let us know so that we can pass on your tip to other students.