

## Coping Strategies

### **Relaxation**

You can sometimes prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using relaxation techniques". Some people can relax through

- Exercise
- listening to music
- watching TV
- reading a book

What do you do to relax? Write down six things you do, or could do to relax. As well as finding everyday ways of relaxing, there are special relaxation techniques which can help with the specific symptoms of anxiety. One of the things that happen to our bodies when we are anxious is that our muscles tense up. To help yourself you should try to relax your muscles whenever you start to feel anxious. Relaxing in this sense is different from the everyday ways of relaxing like putting your feet up and having a cup of tea (although that is just as important!). Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned, and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation, and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some people might find relaxation or yoga classes most helpful, others find tapes useful. There are a wide number of relaxation tapes available in the shops.

These techniques are helpful for a number of reasons:

- They can help you to deal with stressful situations better, and reduce overall levels of anxiety.
- They can "nip anxiety in the bud" stopping the cycle that leads to full blown panic, by reducing anxiety symptoms and preventing hyperventilation.
- They can be used when avoidance is being cut down, to help you cope with situations you fear.
- Being relaxed and breathing calmly is the opposite of panic.

Deep muscle relaxation - It is helpful to read the instructions first and to learn them eventually. Start by selecting quite a warm, comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with. Lie down, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in two-three and out two-three. Say the words "calm" or "relax" to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in when tensing and breathe out when you relax. Starting with your hands, clench one first tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm. Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop. Do the same with the other hand. Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them. It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:

Hands -clench first, then relax.

Arms - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.

Neck - press your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves. Then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.

Face - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.

Chest - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.

Stomach - tense your stomach muscles as tight as you can and relax.

Buttocks - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.

Legs - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes. You may find it helpful to get a friend to read the instructions to you. Don't try too hard, just let it happen.

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

Practise daily.

Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.

Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.

Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, eg breathing slowly.

Develop a more relaxed lifestyle.

Remember relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

### **Controlled Breathing**

When someone becomes frightened they start to breathe more quickly, so that oxygen is pumped more quickly round the body. However if breathing can be controlled, these symptoms may be reduced. Some people find it helpful to use the second hand of a watch to time their breathing. Other people have found breathing into a paper bag or cupped hands helpful. For this to work you must cover your nose and mouth. It takes at least three minutes of slow breathing or breathing into a bag for your breathing to return to normal.

One of the effects of over-breathing is that you feel you need more air, so it is difficult to do something which makes you feel as though you are getting less! Again, practise while you are not panicking to begin with. This technique will only work if you have practised and if it is used for at least three minutes. It works much better in the very early stages of panic. Practise the following as often as you can:

Fill your lungs with air. Imagine you are filling up a bottle, so it fills from the bottom up. Your stomach should push out too. Do not breathe in a shallow way, from your chest, or too deeply.

Keep your breathing nice and slow and calm. Breathe out from your mouth and in through your nose.

Try breathing in slowly saying to yourself: 1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4. Then let the breath out slowly to six: 4 elephant, 5 elephant, 6.

Keep doing this until you feel calm. Sometimes looking at a second hand on a watch can help to slow breathing down.

Remember - Even if you didn't control your breathing, nothing awful is going to happen.

## **Distraction**

If you take your mind off your symptoms you will find that the symptoms often disappear. There are lots of ways you can distract yourself. For example, look at other people, and try to think what they do for a job, listen very carefully to someone talking, count the number of red doors you see on the way home. Study things in detail, registration numbers,

what sort of shoes people are wearing. You can also try thinking of a pleasant scene in your mind, or an object, like a flower or your favourite car. Really concentrate on it. You can try doing sums in your mind, or singing a song. The important thing is that your attention is taken off your body and on to something else. Use what works best for you. Again, you need to distract yourself for at least three minutes before symptoms will begin to reduce.

Whilst relaxation, breathing exercises and distraction techniques can help reduce anxiety it is vitally important to realise that anxiety is not harmful or dangerous. Even if we did not use these techniques, nothing awful would happen. Anxiety cannot harm us, but it can be uncomfortable. These techniques can help reduce this discomfort.