

# RELAXATION TECHNIQUES



**Student Counselling**  
**(021) 460 3237 District Six**  
**(021) 959 6182 Bellville**

Author: Gabrielle Williams  
Truidi-lee Barkhuizen  
Jessica Munnik  
Editor: Heidi Wichman

## RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

When we are under pressure and facing challenges that we don't know how to cope with, stress and anxiety can become overwhelming. The COVID 19 worldwide pandemic has created a massive amount of stress, resulting on psychological difficulties for many people. There are ways that we can treat our stress levels, however, so that we can feel better and have more rational thoughts. This is a list of techniques that may work for you.

## BREATHING TECHNIQUES

### DEEP BREATHING HAS MANY BENEFITS

- Slows down your heart rate
- Reduces blood pressure
- Relaxes muscles
- Promotes mental clarity
- Reduces tension



### CHAIR BREATHING

- Make sure you are sitting comfortably on a chair. Both feet on the ground.
- Close your eyes if you feel comfortable to do so.
- Take your arms around the chair so that you are able to cross your arms behind the back rest of the chair.
- This will open up your diaphragm.
- Take a deep breath in (8 sec),
- Hold it in for 8 seconds
- Blow out for 9 seconds
- Do this while you have a quick break.
- Try and repeat a few times (ideal time would be 15 minutes – but anything is better than nothing).

### DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

- Find a comfortable, quiet place to sit or lie down. You can try it sitting in a chair, sitting cross-legged, or lying on your back.

- If you are sitting in a chair, your knees should be bent and your head, neck and shoulders, relaxed.
  - If you are lying down, you can place a small pillow under your head and one under your knees or you can keep your knees bent.
  - Start by placing one hand on your upper chest (diaphragm).
  - Place the other hand below your ribcage (right above the bellybutton).
  - Breathe in through your nose – the air should move downward so that you feel your stomach rise with your hand. The hand on your chest should remain relatively still.
  - Let your belly relax – you should feel the hand going down.
  - Exhale slowly through pursed lips while the hand on your chest remains still.
- \*It might feel a little awkward at first since most of us are used to breathing with our chest. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

#### ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING

- Close your right nostril with your thumb. Breathe in through left nostril (4 sec).
- Close left nostril with ring finger – close both briefly.
- Open right nostril breath out (6 sec).
- Breathe in through the right nostril (count 4).
- Close the right nostril with thumb. Close both briefly.
- Open left nostril – breath out (6 sec).
- Repeat 6 to 8 times.

#### **MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness is a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.

#### THE RAIN TECHNIQUE

**R**-Recognize what's going on, what is troubling you?

1. Ask yourself "what am I feeling inside of me?"
2. Be courageous when asking yourself this question.

**A**-Allow yourself to feel your emotions, experience your thoughts and sensations.



1. When we have unpleasant experiences we tend to react in different ways. We could be numbing ourselves to the feelings we experiencing. We could ignore our feelings by focusing our attention elsewhere or we focus on judgment, whether it's directed at ourselves or others.
2. Take this time of allowance to be bold and as vulnerable as possible with yourself by just experiencing your feelings. Prevent yourself from resisting the experiences of your emotions

#### I-Investigate your emotions through self-kindness

1. Pause and ask yourself, "What does my thought and emotions want from me?" "What am I feeling?" "Why am I feeling/thinking this?" "What are the thoughts and emotions experiencing within my body right now".
2. Be intentional when you ask these questions and do so by being kind towards yourself, be connected to everything you feeling by being kind to your heart.

#### N-Natural Loving Awareness

1. We become naturally aware of ourselves when we feel fully connected to ourselves. By completing the first three stages you have become naturally aware of yourself. When doing so we live in full openness of where we are presently in our thoughts and our emotions and do so lovingly.
2. Be in a loving relationship with your natural awareness.

Example: I have sad emotions and sad thoughts but looking deep within me they are not who I am, they are simply an extension of me.

#### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is an anxiety-reduction technique which involves alternating tension and relaxation in all of the body's major muscle groups. When we are under great amounts of stress, our muscles are under constant stress. By practicing PMR, you will learn how a relaxed muscle feels different to a tense one.



- Lying down or sitting in a chair, focus on lengthening and deepening your breath. Focus on the inhalation and exhalation making the breath smooth and deep.
- Now tighten both fists and tighten your forearms and biceps.
- Hold the tension for five or six seconds.
- Now relax the muscles.
- When you relax the tension, do it suddenly, as if you are turning off a light.
- Concentrate on the feelings of relaxation in your arms for 15 or 20 seconds.
- Now tense the muscles of your face and tense your jaw.
- Hold it for five or six seconds.
- Now relax and concentrate on the relaxation for fifteen or twenty seconds.
- Now arch your back and press out your stomach as you take a deep breath.
- Hold it and relax.
- Now tense your thighs and calves and buttocks ... Hold ... and now relax. Concentrate on the feelings of relaxation throughout your body, breathing slowly and deeply.

### **Stimulate the Vagus Nerve**

The vagus nerve is the longest nerve in your body. It connects your brain to many important organs throughout the body, including the gut (intestines, stomach), heart and lungs. The vagus nerve is also a key part of your parasympathetic “rest and digest” nervous system. It influences your breathing, digestive function and heart rate, all of which can have a huge impact on your mental health. But what you really need to pay special attention to is the "tone" of your vagus nerve. Vagal tone is an internal biological process that represents the activity of the vagus nerve. Increasing your vagal tone activates the parasympathetic nervous system, and having higher vagal tone means that your body can relax faster after stress. There are various ways that you can stimulate it to help you calm down.

#### **SPLASH COLD WATER ON YOUR FACE**

Splash cold water from the bottom of your chin up to the top of your head. The cold temperature is effective in stimulating the vagus nerve. You could even have a cold shower if you are feeling particularly overwhelmed or drink a glass of ice-cold water

## GARGLE

The vagus nerve activates the muscles in the back of the throat that allows you to gargle. When you gargle these muscles are contracted, which activates the vagus nerve and simulate the gastrointestinal tract. Can't gargle? Try humming, chanting or singing really loudly to yourself.

## BUTTERFLY HUG

Give yourself a butterfly hug. You can do this by wrapping your arms around yourself in a nice tight hug that each hand touches the shoulder. You can then start to move your hands like the wing of a butterfly, rubbing your hands up and down your arms.



## DANCE

Moving your body in any way is a very effective way to activate the vagus nerve and creates a feeling of safety within your nervous system.

## NAME AND DRAIN

Naming your experience out loud, such as “I’m feeling scared / / confused / overwhelmed” is a great way to provide a sense of safety to your nervous system. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, as they are your body’s way of letting you know that there is a threat un the environment.

## GET A MASSAGE

The vagus nerve can also be stimulated by massaging several specific areas of the body. Foot massages (reflexology) have been shown to increase vagal modulation and heart rate variability and decrease the “fight or flight” sympathetic response.



## References

- Brach, T. (2019). Feeling Overwhelmed? Remember “RAIN.” Retrieved from <https://mrsmindfulness.com/r-n-four-step-process-using-mindfulness-difficult-times/> Accessed April 29, 2020
- Cleveland Clinic. (2018). Diaphragmatic Breathing. Retrieved from <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/9445-diaphragmatic-breathing> Accessed 4 May 2020
- Fallis, J. (2017). How to stimulate your vagus nerve for better mental health. Retrieved from [https://sass.uottawa.ca/sites/sass.uottawa.ca/files/how\\_to\\_stimulate\\_your\\_vagus\\_nerve\\_for\\_better\\_mental\\_health\\_1.pdf](https://sass.uottawa.ca/sites/sass.uottawa.ca/files/how_to_stimulate_your_vagus_nerve_for_better_mental_health_1.pdf) Accessed 30 April 2020
- Fasolo, A. (2020). 6 Psychologist-approved hacks for calming your nervous system, and mind. Retrieved from <https://www.bodyandsoul.com.au/mind-body/wellbeing/6-psychologistapproved-hacks-for-calming-your-nervous-system-and-mind/news-story/4d9d9e977c369ef471684f3508b3401c> Accessed 30 April 2020
- Gentry, E. & Rhoton, R. (2018). Trauma Competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the empowerment & resilience structure. Retrieved from <https://www.udemy.com/course/certified-clinical-trauma-specialist-individual-ccts-i/learn/lecture/12855738?start=15#questions> Accessed 25 April 2020
- Hazlett-Stevens, H., & Craske, M. G. (2003). *Breathing retraining and diaphragmatic breathing techniques. Cognitive Behavior Therapy applying empirically supported techniques in your practice.*
- Jerath, R., Crawford, M. W., Barnes, V. A., & Harden, K. (2015). Self-Regulation of Breathing as a Primary Treatment for Anxiety. *Applied Psychophysiology Biofeedback*, 40(2), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10484-015-9279-8>
- Valenza, M. C., Valenza-Peña, G., Torres-Sánchez, I., González-Jiménez, E., Conde-Valero, A., & Valenza-Demet, G. (2014). Effectiveness of controlled breathing techniques on anxiety and depression in hospitalized patients with COPD: A randomized clinical trial. *Respiratory Care*, 59(2), 209–215. <https://doi.org/10.4187/respcare.02565>
- Yogatailor. (2017). 3 Types of Controlled Breathing Exercises and How to Do Them. Retrieved from <http://www.yogatailor.com/blog/> Accessed 4 May 2020

You could also get more information on Student Counselling’s web page at <http://www.cput.ac.za/students/life/counselling> or follow the Blog at <http://www.cput.ac.za/blogs/> for related posts and articles.

