

relaxation and nervous system regulation exercises

Objectives

to provide a range of simple exercises that encourage the regular practice of relaxation and to help build resilience with increased awareness of stress activation followed by the body's natural recovery system - the relaxation response

When practising any relaxation, mindfulness or meditation techniques if you should experience any emotional or physical discomfort that feels overwhelming then open your eyes and select objects in the room to focus on. Picking up their shape and colour. It may also help to place your feet on the floor and experience the sensation of the floor beneath your feet as a comforting solid sensation. Give yourself a few minutes to re-engage your senses with the room. Please consider discussing your experience with your GP or other medical professional. The following exercises are not meant as a replacement for any medical advice and are provided for educational and general wellbeing purposes only. If you are suffering from any mental or physical health issues you should always bring these to the attention of any teacher providing instruction with such exercises.

General Guidelines

These exercises have been designed as aids to accompany the 'recent workshop you attended. For reasons of safety and copyright they should not be distributed to anyone that was not at the workshop.

Please note the following general guidelines will help you develop your own relaxation and nervous system regulation techniques in a safe and progressive way.

First, it is important to remember that, as with most skills development or learning, progress is not always linear. Sometimes we will find it hard to focus our attention and our minds will wander more one day than on other days. Don't try to mentally force the exercises. Enjoy them as peaceful calming moments. Bring a relaxed awareness and a patient mindset to each period of practice. There may be days or weeks when practice feels difficult. This is fine. It is the regular practise that is important and not how well you do in each period of practice. We referred to this in the workshop - it is the neuroplasticity of the brain that helps embed the regular practise of anything into the neural networks that support behavioural habits - you can have good and bad habits!

Second develop at your own pace and don't be influenced by the *apparent* progress of others. If you manage 2 minutes a day for a month that is fine. If you can progress to managing 5 - 10 minutes, 6 days a week and 2 minutes the other day then that's fine too. Slowly build the habit and it will not let you down. Try to practise for too long and you may find it hard to sustain.

As your practice time lengthens and your ability to focus in the moment improves it may trigger unexpected physical or emotional releases. If these are comfortable for you while they are happening them remaining aware of them and allowing the release to run its course will probably help your mind and body. If they are uncomfortable or overwhelming then open your eyes and gaze around the room taking in objects, colours, naming them etc. This will help orientate yourself back into the room and the real time of your surroundings. You can also 'ground' yourself by feeling the contact of

your feet with the ground and your body in the chair. Experience the feelings of this contact to help settle you.

It would be a good idea to discuss any such experiences with 7Futures or an experienced mindfulness or somatic experiencing practitioner so that they can guide you as to how to maintain your practice and work through such releases. Always seek advice from your GP if you have any medical health concerns. They are the guardians of your health records and are well placed to provide you with sensible balanced opinion. These and other mind-body practices such as yoga and tai chi can be very therapeutic and beneficial for our wellbeing **but they are not a substitute for your GP.**

Preparation

When you are preparing for any period of practice the following will generally help:

- warm, loose clothing is normally more comfortable than tight clothing but there is no reason why you cannot practise some techniques while sitting and dressed formally
- approach each period of practice with an intention - is it to relax; is it to develop your relaxation technique; is it to manage your emotions going into a difficult presentation or interview; or, to recover from stress; develop your attentional awareness through a mindfulness technique and so on.
- try to find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed - turn off mobiles and other devices

1. Diaphragmatic breathing

The diaphragm is a large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen and is an excellent tool to stimulate the relaxation response. This will result in recovery from sympathetic nervous system activation and a pleasant sense of well being.

Breathing Technique

Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Take a deep breath in by trying to push the hand on your stomach out while keeping the hand on your chest still. This helps to pull air into the base of the lungs such that they more fully expand.

It may feel easier to master by breathing in through the nose (as you push your stomach out) and then pursing your lips to breath out through the mouth. Your stomach will naturally sink back. Once you develop a rhythm for this it will feel a lot easier and more natural.

It is important to remember that we improve the depth of our breathing not by inhaling more air but through completely exhaling it. So you may find it helpful to breath in for say a count of 4 (or whatever feels comfortable) and then slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 5 or 6. i.e. count on the out breath for 1 or 2 more counts. As you become more adept at this technique you can lengthen the count for the out breath.

Repeat the cycle count for long enough for it to feel comfortable and relaxing. Even if you do this technique for a minute a day it will help. It is particularly beneficial to practise when feeling anxious, angry, fearful and upset. It will help create some time and space for your thinking brain to create a sense of perspective and explore other more positive emotions. It is also very beneficial to do for a few minutes when you get in from work - to create a natural break from the activation of the day and all the sympathetic firing of your nervous system. Or maybe before preparing for an interview, presentation etc.

2. Extended diaphragmatic breathing and energy discharge

The objective of this short exercise (which can be done just about anywhere) is to develop our focus and attention (thinking mind skills) and our 'felt sense' - an attribute of our biology (or survival brain). By developing our focus/attention and felt sense we can become more capable of supporting the natural design of the autonomic nervous system as it cycles from stress activation to calm awareness.

Working intelligently with your autonomic nervous system, to fully complete your stress response, will encourage your nervous system to build resilience. This physiological process underpins the psychological state of our mind. It is 'feeling' or 'sensing' your way to resilience rather than 'thinking' your way to resilience i.e. we are not encouraging people to adopt positive psychology as a means to develop resilience. To understand more about the 'felt sense' you may wish to study the work/books of Peter Levine: an adviser to NASA on their stress management programmes and a world-leading expert on developing resilience.

If you have experienced a traumatic incident such as physical/sexual abuse, a car accident, frightening natural event (earthquake etc.), sudden loss of loved one etc. then this exercise can release powerful and overwhelming sensations. If this happens then follow the instructions at the start of this document and consult a professional adviser that specialises in trauma counselling/PTSD. This is for your safety and to avoid deepening past trauma. Please take this recommendation seriously as it could make a huge improvement to the quality of your life and future wellbeing.

Adopting a seated posture with an upright, relaxed spine, allowing your breathing to settle take a minute to experience the external world: with eyes open or closed. So....just being aware of what we do most of the time and that is process external stimuli from our environment: sounds, sights, external temperature, any air/breeze, contact with objects.

Then extend that awareness to the feeling of your two feet resting on the floor. How does this feel to you? What are the differences between the right and left foot and different parts of the feet? Use the sensations to help keep your mind focused on the feet and when the mind wanders bring it back to the sensations. There is no need to judge the sensations just feel them and perhaps acknowledge in your thinking mind that the floor is a 'safe' sensation to experience.

Take that awareness to your legs and bottom resting against the chair. Again explore how that sensation of contact with the chair feels and again notice the chair is safe and supportive of your physical body. It is a solid supportive structure allowing you to rest and be calm. Use the sensations to guide the wandering, restless mind back to where you want it to focus.

Next move your awareness to your lower back, also being supported by the chair and repeat the explorations of sensations of support. How does the chair and back feel?

And then guide your awareness to your hands. Are they resting on your legs or in contact with each other? Sense how your hands feel externally - where are they touching each other or your legs? How does this pressure feel...light, gentle, heavy etc.?

This guidance of your awareness from feet to hands should take no more than 2 minutes and complete it with a calm awareness not worrying about how you are doing it or if the mind wanders. Just guiding it back to the body by using your attention, focus and experiencing of sensations.

Once you have focused your awareness on your hands for 30 seconds or so, allow yourself to experience a few calming diaphragmatic breaths and then open your awareness to the whole of your body. Notice if you experience any:

tingling, muscle tremors, flutters or twitches
 changes in internal temperature - heat or cool
 yawning
 lightness or heaviness in muscles
 some jolting/spasms of joints or muscles; shaking of limbs or the body
 nausea

These, and other sensations, can mean the nervous system is discharging stress activation and completing the stress response. If the sensations are not too overwhelming or unpleasant see if you can stay with them, allowing them to run their course. Mindfully observing and experiencing the sensations and any emotions attached to them without reacting to them will help. This may take several minutes. If you do begin to experience powerful/overwhelming sensations or emotions focus your attention on feeling the ground and the chair and remain with that feeling to calm

yourself. Please feel free to contact us for confidential guidance on what you have experienced.

Once you have worked with the energy discharge your body will want to relax and you can now extend into the diaphragmatic breathing exercise to help this natural process. See if you can take a few minutes to encourage a pleasant relaxed feeling from which you can begin to understand the benefits of developing this calm aware state.

3. Quick 1/2 Minute Relaxation

When at work or when traveling, you may wish to develop a regular practice of triggering the relaxation response. This can be done by focusing on your eyes, tongue, lips, jaw, chest and stomach as parts of the body which you can relax. Focusing on these body parts, experiencing their sensations and movement and allowing your breathing to deepen may all help trigger the relaxation response. The more often the better if you know you are experiencing a lot of sympathetic nervous system activation.

NB These quick exercises are not meant as an alternative to the exercises above but as a means to more regularly develop the habit of relaxing.

7futures Ltd offers general information which is for educational purposes only. The information provided here is not a prescription system and is not intended to be a substitute for professional exercise or medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This article is for general information purposes only and should not be read as a personal recommendation for changes in lifestyle behaviour, nutrition, or exercise. 7futures cannot be held responsible for any reaction, injury or illness relating to any relaxation/mindfulness techniques and any such lifestyle or behavioural changes undertaken