

CRAMOND MEDICAL PRACTICE



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RELAXATION

&

HOW TO ACHIEVE IT.

A Self-Help Booklet from the
Cramond Counselling Service

DIFFERENT FORMS OF RELAXATION

It is very important to learn to be able to relax properly. This helps you to re-balance your basic bodily functioning (Autonomic Nervous System), which often gets overstressed – especially with anxiety. For most people suffering from anxiety, or under stress, it is very difficult to relax – for 3 main reasons:

- (1) They (think they) don't have the time; or that they can't do 'properly'; or that it won't work; or whatever. This is just the 'anxiety' talking. Don't listen to it!
- (2) They may be using their anxiety (and activity) to keep themselves – so they think – from disappearing into the 'black hole' of depression. Sorry: Anxiety is often a part of depression.
- (3) They are so full of stress hormones that they just cannot relax easily.

It is therefore necessary to 'build-in' (and/or 'build up to') a programme of relaxation (ideally once or twice a day (10-12 times a week) for about 15-20 minutes each time); and this relaxation should ideally be done sometime after you have done any of your daily (regular) exercise routines.

There are many different relaxation techniques, all of which have their own proponents and claimants: visualization; relaxation CDs; a long hot bath; listening to your own "chill-out" play-list form of music; reading; prayer; humour; biofeedback; tai chi; a day out, or a day off – doing something different; a massage or a spa day; meditation; and/or mindfulness practice; are just some of the readily available choices. You will need to find the one (or two, or three) forms of relaxation that work best for you. Many of the more effective techniques carry a significant common feature: increased self-awareness.

Increased Self-Awareness

This is a method of 'tapping' into the body's own resources, through increased self-awareness, especially related to your anxiety. This is also method that can be applied to many different conditions. For anxious people, it is particularly effective. In Anxiety Management courses, promoted by various departments of various NHS Trusts, one of the first 'techniques' is to look at different forms of breathing & relaxation, often combined with exercises using imagination. These all carry self-awareness as an essential component. When you are aware that you are anxious, you can try to do something to relax. If you are unaware that you're very anxious, you may need some help to get started.

Types of Relaxation

There are many different types of relaxation techniques. Here are some suggestions:

- **Progressive Relaxation:** You can get tapes or CD's of (usually) Progressive Relaxation exercises that tell you how first to tense, then to relax, all the various sets of muscles in your body. As you do this, you progressively relax more and more.

- **Autogenic Therapy:** I often teach people the principles of a form of Autogenic Therapy, a form of relaxation that was designed for people with hypertension, and it works by using a script (to say to yourself) and an image for the various parts of the body, whereby you imagine that part of the body actually ‘being’ relaxed. The advantage of learning something like this system is that you can do it anywhere and without any special equipment. You can also get a book about it, or there are special therapists (in Edinburgh).
- **Music:** Certain types of music are very soothing and relaxing: Mozart, Chopin, some Bach, Boccherini, Albinoni, Debussy, etc. as well as more modern music. Try to get some CDs or tapes and listen to these in the car, or at home. Build – up a “chilled-out” play-list. Alternatively tune your car radio to Radio 3 or Classic FM, rather than the news or to a pop music channel.
- **Warm Water:** This is very relaxing. Go for Radox-type baths, a nice long soak in the bath with a candle and some background music. Or get yourself to the nearest jacuzzi, maybe even in your lunch hour; or go to a spa once a month with your partner or girl friend (gym, swim, soak, sweat, steam, and maybe even a treatment: You’re worth it!. Hydrotherapy is a very well established relaxation treatment.
- **Massage** is also an excellent form of relaxation. It does not particularly matter what type of massage, but aroma therapy massages are now quite popular and fairly readily available. They will usually cost between £20-30, but it is an excellent investment to kick-start you into a better pattern of relaxation and self-care. Ask your partner for a foot-massage as you watch TV together. Sometimes a bit of self-massage helps: first do the scalp; then the back of the neck; then one shoulder after another; then those tense muscles at the top of the chest towards the shoulder; and then those by the collar bones; can all be massaged by yourself, taking only a minute or two, whilst at work or at home, and without much embarrassment.
- **Breaks** are also important. You have scheduled tea-breaks at work: so take them: don’t work on through. You should have a half-hour minimum lunch break, by law: take it. Get out of the office or workplace. Don’t pass up on holidays, or claim your ‘time-in-lieu’. If you work from home: take 5 minutes every hour – as a minimum – plus a proper lunch break away from your work. Arrange for quality time away, mini-breaks, long weekends, or whatever. Anything less than this is basically counter-productive in the long term.
- **Leisure & Pleasure:** Reading, watching films or TV, listening to music or the radio, can also be very relaxing – in relatively small doses. It is best to have a regular routine and stick to it: reading the paper on the way to work; or watching the news or a favourite TV show at a set time.

- **Mediation and Mindfulness** techniques are becoming much more fashionable as people realise their efficacy. There are a couple of pages of hand-outs on these methods that follow on.
- **Philosophy:** Perhaps something needs to be said here about one's basic philosophy. For thousands of years people – from all religions – have been struggling with the basic 'human condition': Life is very difficult! Every culture has a different approach to this. But worrying about it gives you two problems immediately: life is difficult anyway, and you want or expect or fear something different. Of course, we would like things to be more like Paradise, or the Garden of Eden, or some mythical time. But life just is not like that. Sorry! That is the world of myths and fairy tales. Life is not easy, and yet it can also be interesting, and it can even be enjoyable. Try to adopt a different basic – more relaxed – attitude to Life, and maybe try to chill out a bit more whenever you notice you are starting to get worried or anxious about something. Anxiety and worrying doesn't help you – or anyone else, and worrying about something never changed anything.

MEDITATION

A very powerful form of relaxation is regular 'meditation'. This does not have to be religious, or based on a particular faith. Essentially it is sitting still, breathing regularly, and quietening your mind. When you do this, your body slows down and you shift more into the 'parasympathetic' or 'relaxed' mode. Eventually, your mind will slow down as well and you will become more peaceful and relaxed. This is extremely good for – and has been shown to be very effective for – many medical conditions, like hypertension (high blood pressure), or for reducing the stress that can aggravate many conditions, both medical and psychological.

“A still mind is a mind that is free from fear, free from fantasies, free from ruminations over the past, free from concern about what may or may not be happening to it. It is mind no longer disturbed by the many thoughts that come from believing that fulfilment lies in what we have or what we do.” Peter Russell

Meditation Position

Make sure you are not going to be disturbed: switch the ringer on the phone off; turn off the mobile; hang a note on the bedroom door; tell others in the house you are going to meditate for (say) 20 minutes. Settle into a comfortable sitting position, either on a straight-backed chair, with your feet flat on the floor, or sitting cross-legged on a soft surface on the floor. Your spine should be vertical, your body fairly relaxed, your weight supported and balanced.

Check your Body & Breathing

Bring your awareness to how your body is feeling. Spend a minute or so, just checking your self out, doing a body scan. Become aware of how your body feels; warm or cold, comfortable or uncomfortable, the feel of your clothes against your skin, and whether your belt, waist band, or collar feels constraining. Make any

adjustments necessary. Then, become aware of your breathing: is it deep, shallow or light; is it only in the chest or the belly; are you holding your breath at all, or is it flowing in and out fairly freely? Become aware of which parts of your body move when you breathe: maybe there is a slight pause at the top of the in-breath or at the bottom of the out-breath. Maybe you are breathing in and out only through your nose, or only through your mouth. Don't try to control your breathing, just allow the breath to flow – in and out. Simply let the breath 'breathe' itself. This is very peaceful. You do not really have to do anything else, just keep on doing this.

Either Empty Your Mind or Focus Your Mind

Sooner or later your mind will start to wander, or thoughts will come into your mind that can distract your awareness and your 'peace of mind'. This is very common, especially in the early learning stages. It is not a mistake or failure: it is just what the mind does. Congratulations for noticing that your attention is not on your breath. Just empty your mind of its thoughts, and/or re-focus on your breathing. This will happen over and over again. Just keep on emptying your mind of thoughts and re-focussing your awareness on your breathing.

Sometimes you might wish to focus or meditate on a particular topic, like 'world peace', a prayer for someone close to you, or 'healing'. As you breathe in, concentrate or focus these qualities inside of you; as you breathe out, send out these qualities into the world. Again, your attention may wander at times, or thoughts may cascade through your mind. That is normal: just re-focus your attention and awareness on your intent. Make each moment count. Keep coming back to the topic or focus of the meditation.

All thoughts have equal value: there are not 'good' thoughts or 'bad' thoughts. Thinking is not 'bad' and an empty mind 'good'. Do not get distracted by judgement or by content. Do not try to suppress or eliminate certain thoughts or topics. Then decide what to do with them: thoughts of aggression are potentially dangerous for someone; thoughts that you'd like to get rid of someone, doesn't mean that you are a bad or evil person. What matters is your awareness of your thoughts and when you are thinking, and what you want to do about it: judge it, hang on to it, or let it go. The last suggestion is the best one: our thoughts can distract us.

Length

Continue like this for 15 to 20 minutes (or longer if you wish). 15-20 minutes is the minimum time to get the maximum benefit. Try doing this once or twice a day, regularly, every day. The affect is cumulative, so you may not notice a huge difference after just the first few times. The effect is usually quite subtle, though – over time – it is powerful. After a while, you will really notice the difference if you miss doing your regular meditation. Just find a few moments and do it again.

Practice, practice and more practice

You are gradually training your mind to become less reactive and calmer. You will find this has other, wider benefits. Your anxiety and stress levels will start to diminish. You will be able to concentrate more. You will feel more centred. You will have greater patience. You will become less judgemental. Each meditation is different. They vary considerably. Some meditations can be dramatic, visionary or life-changing, however these are fairly rare. In some meditations, you may fall asleep. Just observe the differences. Don't get caught up in the 'glamour' of any particularly powerful meditation. Meditation really only works when done with a degree of regularity, over a longish time period: it is not something to just 'turn on' or 'turn off' at a whim or only when needed.

The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization. And when native man left off this form of development, his humanization was retarded in growth.

Chief Luther Standing Bear

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

When we are stressed, we often become absent-minded, or we may be doing something (like reading a book) and realise that we have not been aware of doing it (or what we are reading): our mind has become distracted. When we are on 'automatic pilot' like this, our body is doing one thing and our mind is doing another. Accidents and mistakes can therefore happen. Negative thoughts can build up and coalesce 'behind' what we are doing on the day-to-day level. We are trying to find 'better' solutions to our stress, but we are often constantly monitoring and judging (and therefore undermining) how and what we are doing. On a day-to-day basis, this sort of 'mind-less-ness' is not very productive and can even quite harmful.

So, another form of 'meditation' is called "Mindfulness practice" – this is where one pays close attention to what you are actually doing and feeling (experiencing), both internally and externally, at 'this' precise moment: it is a (sort of) focussed awareness. Mindfulness practice has been shown to promote better well-being and health. It can also be seen as a 'way of being' and can be practised at any time, doing anything. It can be useful for anxiety, depression, better pain control, anger management, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, and self-healing, as well as for stress.

Mindfulness means – paying attention – in a particular way – on purpose – in the present moment – and non-judgementally. The core skills of mindfulness are: 'Be Aware' and 'Let Go!' Being aware is literally just that: being aware that you have a pain here; that you find this or that activity stressful; that you don't have the energy for 'this' any longer; or that you are irritated by that person. Letting go is literally just that:

letting go of your irritation, your pain, your stress, your boredom, anger or fatigue; freeing your self from any attachments or fixed ideas, as these can ‘trap’ us, or fix us into a particular position.

Practicing Mindfulness

You can start practicing mindfulness by introducing ‘mindful’ meditations into your regular routine of meditation. Let mindfulness (or awareness) become the ‘focus’ of your meditation. In your meditation, done as mentioned before, become aware of every feeling or sensation; every thought or every noise outside – the ticking of the clock, the distant traffic, bird song. And then let these perceptions go! Expand and extend your awareness – and then just let any insights or sensations go: there is a continual emptying process. Try to stay in the moment: what am I aware of now? What now?

Then you can extend your mindfulness practice into everything that you are doing. How am I doing this? How interesting! What am I feeling now? How interesting! And then let all this go. The moment passes. You are doing or feeling something else. How interesting! And now move on to the next moment.

For example: if you are standing at the sink, doing the washing up, and thinking about a conversion you had earlier or the shopping list for later, then you are not ‘fully present’ and you are not being ‘mindful’. If – instead – you are aware of the water temperature on your hands, the smell of the soap liquid, the feeling from the little mop or sponges as you clean the plate, the sight of when rinsing it under the tap, and the click-clunk as it goes in the rack, then you are ‘fully present’, you are doing the washing up ‘mindfully’, and you will have given yourself a very different (and probably much richer) experience. You can be taught mindfulness practice; but you will still have to learn it – and that takes practice! However, it is very worthwhile.

Next, you can go deeper into what you are doing. When eating a tangerine, become aware of the texture of the skin, its brilliant orange-ness, and the contrast with the whiteness inside. The feel of the skin being peeled away from the fruit; the tiny spurt of juice and scent; the separation of the segments; the explosion of taste as you bite into a segment; the smell; the discarded peel. You can become aware of the tree on which it grew; how many hours of sunshine it absorbed; the water and the warmth necessary for it to grow; the people who grew it and picked it; the country it grew in; and how it has travelled across the world to end up in your hand. What a depth and miracle of mindfulness there is in this one action! And now move on to the next action. Maybe, at this point in time, you become aware of the sunshine (or weather) outside; the bird song or street noises; other people in the house – and so forth. All these are a part of the experience of doing eating the tangerine or doing the washing up (or whatever you are doing). Mindfulness practice enriches these experiences.

If you catch yourself thinking about tomorrow’s shopping list, stop doing the washing up, write down the shopping list, then return to doing the washing up. Stay in the moment. If you don’t like washing up, and

want to finish it quickly – so as to watch TV or eat dessert, you may become equally incapable of enjoying TV or dessert – as your mind will jump on to the next action. Focus on this one, just this one action in this moment, and you may find that you quite enjoy the process of washing up ‘mindfully’.

Western Mindfulness

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn started working with a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program at a University Hospital in Massachusetts and since then it has expanded widely and is now used for a variety of conditions in both the unwell and healthy: in particular . However, it was (and still is) inspired by traditional Buddhist practices. The “body scan” is similar to what was described in the previous section:

When you are ready, on an inbreath, feel or imagine the breath entering the lungs, and then passing down into the abdomen, into the left leg, the left foot, and out to the toes of the left foot. Then, on the outbreath, feel or imagine the breath coming all the way back up, out of the foot, into the leg, up through the abdomen, chest, and out through the nose. As best you can, continue this for a few breaths, breathing down into the toes, and back out from the toes. It may be difficult to get the hang of this just practice this "breathing into" as best you can, approaching it playfully.

The Process of Mindfulness

There is no end to this process. Each meditation, each ‘mindful’ action can build and grow. The further in you go into the territory of mindfulness, the bigger it gets. You will probably slow down a little; you will become calmer and less reactive; you will look at the wider picture; and you will probably become more thoughtful: you may even work better (more efficiently). It is so simple, and it is not – for a moment – very easy. This is definitely ‘the road less travelled’ – yet it is a very rich journey. We can even make each step that we take (literally) ‘mindful’, so it becomes like a walking meditation. We are not trying to get anywhere in particular, or trying to get to some specific end: we are just making every moment count more fully. We are just enjoying the process of travelling: really enriching the journey itself. This is a way towards finding what we really want out of life, and who we really are, as well.

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