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How to Utilize Relaxation (or Biofeedback) Techniques for Headaches, Nervousness, or Insomnia

Relaxation exercises can help with headaches and neck pain or for general nervousness/anxiety. Some people practice the exercises, particularly deep breathing, for a few minutes each day, while others use the exercises for several minutes only when they have a headache.

To learn relaxation techniques, try several of these sample exercises, particularly the breathing exercises. Learning simple deep-breathing can produce instant relaxation.

Books or cassette tapes obtained in bookstores are helpful in learning about relaxation. The success of relaxation therapy is directly related to the motivation of the person performing the exercises. If you do not think that you are the type of person who would use relaxation exercises on a regular basis, it will most likely be a waste of your time to attempt this therapy.

Relaxation exercises are helpful because they relax the muscles around your head and neck, and can also help you attain a more relaxed state.

Many psychotherapists or psychologists teach relaxation and biofeedback. It may only require 1 to 4 sessions with a therapist for you to become proficient at it.

Sample Relaxation Exercises: Practice Daily (5 to 10 minutes). Use these at the onset of a headache, or for anxiety or insomnia.

Breathing Exercises

Learning to breathe deeply is the first step in learning to relax, and the deep diaphragmatic breath is the core of the relaxation exercises.

1 - to - 4 Count:

Take a deep, full breath. Exhale fully and completely. Inhale again, and mentally count from 1 to 4. Hold your breath, and again count from 1 to 4. Slowly count from 1 to 8 while exhaling fully and completely. Repeat the sequence four times.

30 - Second Relaxation Procedure:

Take 3 slow, deep abdominal breaths, saying to yourself

"1" (as you inhale), "relax" (as you exhale);

"2" (as you inhale), "relax" (as you exhale);

"3" (as you inhale), "relax" (as you exhale).

This exercise is particularly effective at stressful or harried times when you notice yourself tensing up.

Hand Warming

Biofeedback is a method of helping headaches without medication. By doing the following simple exercise, 1-2 minutes at a time, you can relax the muscles around the head and also affect blood flow, thus preventing or lessening the pain. This is done by raising your skin temperature several degrees through the following exercise:

1. Breathe deeper than you normally would: be aware of your breathing.
Let your stomach expand and contract; do not breathe only with the top of your chest. You can do this with eyes open or closed.
2. Say to yourself: "My head is cooling; my hands are warming."
3. Concentrate on your breathing while you continue to say this for 1-2 minutes.
4. Do the exercise several times a day, and try it at the beginning of a headache.
5. After you are comfortable with the exercise, it will help if you can picture in your mind a warm place. Picture yourself on a warm beach, or picture yourself by a nice, warm fireplace, or picture any similar scene that you feel comfortable with. Add this visualization of a warm place to the above exercises.

Visual Imagery

Imagery can be put to use in bringing about relaxation. By simply allowing your mind to imagine some very pleasant, quiet calming scene, you can produce the physical responses that would be present in those surroundings. The imagined place can be either a real one that you find particularly pleasant or one conjured up by your imagination. In either case, you should imagine a place that gives you a sense of well-being and warmth, e.g., a lovely, sunny beach; a warm inviting fireplace; a room you are particularly fond of and in which you feel cozy.

Before beginning the exercise, take three deep, slow and flowing breaths. Move yourself into the picture that you are imagining. Try to see, hear, smell, and feel every detail of the image as though you were there. Bring your senses close to the details of the image. Experience as much of the imaginary situation as possible. Become involved in the process of being there.

At the end of the exercise, take two deep, slow breaths, inhaling a sense of well-being and energy, exhaling any tension that might be left, and give yourself an inner smile.

Muscle Relaxation Exercise
(Particularly Useful for Insomnia)

Think of your muscles in groups (such as all the muscles in the arms, legs and chest). Focusing on one group of muscles at a time, allow all the tension and discomfort to flow away from these muscles. In order to do this, you may use imagery, autogenic exercises, and breathing exercises in any combination. Tensing, then relaxing, muscles in each part of your body may be helpful. (See previous explanations for details of each exercise). For example, you may imagine your muscles are being massaged, warmed by a heating pad, smoothed out, or just becoming heavy and loose.

To begin this exercise, find a comfortable position and take three deep but gentle breaths. Allowing all the tension and discomfort to flow away as described above, focus on each of the following areas in turn:

1. feet
2. lower legs
3. upper legs, with special attention paid to inner thighs
4. buttocks muscles and sphincters
5. lower back and stomach
6. chest
7. upper back
8. shoulders
9. neck
10. base of skull
11. jaw
12. tongue
13. temples
14. eyes
15. forehead
16. scalp

At the end of the exercise, take two deep, slow breaths, inhaling a sense of well-being and energy, and exhaling any tension that might remain.