



RELAXATION TECHNIQUES FOR QUALITY SLEEP

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About Muscle Tension



We have over 600 muscles in the body which are made up of fibres which can shorten or lengthen. They are long and flat when relaxed and bunched up and tight when tensed (e.g. the biceps when they are flexed).

When our nervous systems are stressed the blood flow to the muscles can become reduced (causing tension). Muscle tension is the body's defence against injury and pain and they release tension when short term stress passes. However, with chronic or long term stress the muscles in the body are in a constant state of tension.

Increased stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, can take a toll on the body physically as they increase things like heart rate and blood pressure.

Fear, worry, and anxiety can contribute to muscle pain and tightness. Low-grade chronic stress not only leads to muscle tension but can also lead to high blood pressure.

By bringing our attention to these sensations in the body and recognising we are in a state of anxiety or stress, we can then apply relaxation techniques to reduce and manage it.

Focussing on something like the muscle groups in the body also gets us out of the thoughts in our head and into our bodies and the present moment.



“Pain is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage.”

(The International Association for the Study of Pain)

Acute pain is short term pain as a result of an injury or tissue damage and is usually gone when the injury heals. Chronic pain is ongoing, felt every day of the week and can cause emotional and mental stress, especially if it prevents a person from being able to work, exercise, socialise, sleep and enjoy their life. Living with pain, either chronic or acute, can be physically and emotionally difficult, making everyday activities challenging; sometimes even excruciating.

One in 5 Australians aged 45 and over are living with persistent, ongoing pain.

The first thing most of us do with pain is push it away wanting it to end or resist the feeling, and it's that resistance that can often exacerbate our pain or discomfort. Rather than trying to ignore or block the pain, focussing your awareness on it by doing something like a body scan, can actually reduce the sensation.

Practising techniques such as meditation can:

- ☐ Teach you to adopt a curious mind to explore and investigate the pain.
- ☐ Change your perception and experience of pain by bringing a detached awareness to it.
- ☐ Release endorphins, the body's natural pain killer.
- ☐ Relax the muscles that may be tense due to sensations of pain.

The Stress Response



When we get stressed or fearful there are several things that happen in our brains:

- ☐ The Amygdala is activated – the emotional response centre.
- ☐ The Prefrontal Cortex is deactivated – the logical, decision making, problem solving intelligence centre.
- ☐ The Amygdala coordinates a response to the threat – by sending the flow of blood to areas like our arms and legs so they can run away, defend us or hide aka Fight, Flight or Freeze.

There are three stages to the stress cycle:

1. Reaction or Response (fight, flight or freeze)
2. Safety (the threat is over)
3. Recovery (body goes back into homeostasis)

In the event of something threatening your life, e.g. a shark attack, you want your body to go through those three stages. However, your brain doesn't know the difference between a shark attack and a stressful event such as argument with a friend, family member or colleague. Stressful events can cause us to go into stage one but in the absence of an actual physical threat to use the excess energy built up when we go into fight or flight, the body can stay in this stress response. Staying in this response mode for prolonged periods, and not going through the safety and recovery modes can cause wear and tear on the body and impaired mental performance.

The bad news is we can get into this same level of stress, without noticing it, just by being busy with our everyday lives. The good news is practising meditation can shrink the Amygdala and make its connection weaker.

Practising mindfulness and meditation enables us to recognise and neutralise the fight or flight response mode and react with a more thoughtful response to stress via other parts of the brain (by engaging the Prefrontal Cortex).

The Relaxation Response



The Relaxation Response is the direct opposite of the Stress Response aka fight, flight or freeze. When we use tools like meditation to practise being in our bodies, sitting in stillness and quieting our minds (by giving it something else to focus on), we cultivate the Relaxation Response.

Practising relaxation exercises such as belly breathing, body scans and meditation, invokes the Relaxation Response by releasing muscle tension and slowing your heart rate.

The Relaxation Response is the optimal condition for the body to heal and function efficiently and effectively.





We go about our day holding tension in our bodies without realising it - if I told you right now to drop your shoulders and create a space between the top and bottom rows of your teeth you would more than likely be able to do both, not realising you were holding your shoulders up or clenching your jaw.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation or PMR involves tensing then relaxing a group of muscles. This reminds your body of the difference between feeling tense and feeling relaxed. Using PMR at night before you go to bed can help you release physical and mental tension that may otherwise interfere with sleep.

- ☐ *Begin by taking a slow breath in through your nose then as you are breathing out through your mouth release a sigh. Continue to breath in through the nose and out through the mouth.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and tense all the muscles in your face (e.g. jaw, eyes and forehead).*
- ☐ *As you breathe out, let them all soften.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and raise your arms in the air with your hands clenched.*
- ☐ *Breathe out, release your fists and lower your hands and arms.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and tense both your arms into a bicep curl.*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let them float back down to your sides.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and shrug your shoulders to your ears.*
- ☐ *As you breathe out release them and let them drop.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and tense your stomach muscles (as if someone is going to punch you in the guts).*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let all those muscles soften.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and tense your buttocks.*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let them soften.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and raise your right leg, tensing your thigh muscles and calf muscles.*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let them soften and lower your leg.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and raise your left leg, tensing your thigh muscles and calf muscles.*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let them soften and lower your leg.*
- ☐ *Breathe in and clench your toes (as if you are trying to grab the carpet/floor).*
- ☐ *Breathe out and let them soften.*
- ☐ *To finish take another slow breath in through your nose then as you are breathing out through your mouth release a sigh.*

Relaxation Exercises – Body Scan



A body scan is a form of Mindfulness Meditation and focusses your attention on the physical sensations of the body, in order to relax both mentally and physically.

Body scans can be used during the day to release stress and focus attention. Used at night a body scan helps release tension from the body to prepare it for sleep – it's very difficult to relax your mind if you haven't relaxed your body.

This process also helps manage pain, stress and anxiety as you begin to become aware of how your stress triggers manifest in your body, e.g. sore neck at the end of a day.

By tuning in to your body you are bringing awareness to tension you may not have noticed, so that you can release it.

- ☐ *Begin by taking a long, slow breath in through your nose and out through your mouth.*
- ☐ *Let your breathing flow naturally then in and out through your nostrils.*
- ☐ *When you're ready close your eyes.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles in your face.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in your forehead, eyes, cheeks and jaw.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles and joints in your neck and shoulders.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in these areas.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles in your arms, hands and fingers.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in your arms.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles and joints in your back.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in this area.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles in your chest and stomach.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in these areas.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles and joints in your hips, pelvis and glutes.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in this area.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to the muscles in thighs, shins and calves .*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in your legs.*
- ☐ *Bring your awareness to your feet and toes.*
- ☐ *On your next out breath – release any tension you are holding in this area.*

Relaxation Exercises – Belly Breathing



When you practise breathing in and out through the nostrils, on each in breath the lungs expand pushing the diaphragm down and the belly out. This movement of the diaphragm massages the vagus nerve which is a cranial nerve running from your brain to your colon. As it's massaged it sends a message to your brain to tell it to calm down. Breathing in through the nose also lowers your heart rate making this a beneficial exercise to do when feeling anxious or overwhelmed.

Try this exercise laying in bed before you go to sleep or if you are having difficulty relaxing.

- ☐ Lay on your back and keep your body in a symmetrical position with your legs out straight and feet lolling to the sides.
- ☐ Place one hand on your chest and the other one on your belly.
- ☐ Relax the muscles in your jaw, forehead and around your eyes as you close them.
- ☐ Take three breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth, allowing your body to settle into your bed.
- ☐ Begin breathing in and out through your nostrils, at your own pace, finding your natural rhythm.
- ☐ Begin noticing the movement of your chest and belly with each breath.
- ☐ As you breathe in notice your chest and belly gently rise.
- ☐ As you breathe out notice your chest and belly gently fall.
- ☐ If your mind begins to wander, gently bring your attention back with the next breath to the movement of your belly.

Refer to my blog post on [Breathing Techniques](#) or my mini course [Breathing Techniques to Reduce Anxiety](#) for more exercises.

Relaxation Exercises – Pain Release



If you are feeling pain or any kind of strong or uncomfortable sensation or emotion in one particular area of the body, rather than trying to ignore it or block it, focus your breathing on this area.

- ☐ Begin by practising the belly breathing exercise.
- ☐ After a minute or so of focussing on your breathing, scan through your body and notice any area of tension, tightness, pain or discomfort.
- ☐ Begin describing the sensation in your mind – thinking about its:
 - ✓ Shape
 - ✓ Size
 - ✓ Colour
 - ✓ Temperature
 - ✓ Density
 - ✓ Texture
 - ✓ Depth
- ☐ Once you have a clear picture of it, begin directing your breath to it – as you breathe in, picture the breath swirling around the outside of it and as you breathe out picture the breath taking some of the sensation away from around the outside of it. Practise this 3-5 times or for a minute.
- ☐ Then as you breathe in picture the breath going to the centre of it and as you breathe out picture the breath drawing some of that sensation away from the centre. Practise this 3-5 times or for a minute.
- ☐ If any of the sensation remains after this you could continue to practise the breathing visualisation or just allow it to be.
- ☐ You could also picture the breath as a soothing colour such as green, blue or white when you are practising this.

You can download the full version of this meditation from [Ian Gawler's Effective Pain Management](#).



Please take a few minutes to complete the following questions to help you practise body relaxation.

Which body relaxation technique did you find the most effective?

Describe the sensation you focussed on in the pain release exercise:

Size -

Shape -

Colour -

Texture -

Density -

Depth -

Temperature -



Download my Meditation Library for free with the discount code RELAXATION at <https://meditation-courses.teachable.com/p/meditations-library>

Enrol in my mini course [Relaxation Techniques for Better Sleep](#).

Contact me on 0438 915 830 or michelle@meditationsunshinecoast.com.au if you have any questions or would like to know more about establishing a mindfulness meditation practice. Services I offer include:

- ☐ Community classes and programs
- ☐ Workplace workshops and programs
- ☐ 1:1 Coaching
- ☐ Online courses



For more tips, tools, resources, and meditations:

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About ME (Michelle Eckles)



Like most people, I began learning meditation during a challenging period in my life. I was utterly overwhelmed with running a business, being a single parent and selling my home. I was taking pain killers for chronic back pain and drinking myself to sleep most nights. I knew I needed something to not just help reduce the feelings of anxiety and overwhelm (without antidepressants), but to also prevent me from getting to that state in the first place.

When I tried to meditate, I couldn't sit still for more than 5 minutes or count to 10 breaths! I struggled to learn through an app or on my own, so I began researching teachers and studying mindfulness and meditation.

As a result, I have completed training and qualifications in Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Training, Guiding & Teaching Meditation, Mindfulness for Wellbeing & Peak Performance, and Corporate Mindfulness. Realising how beneficial these tools would be for kids, I also completed Connected Kids, Meditation Capsules, Inspired Kids Yoga, Calm Kids Coaching, and Youth Psychology and Counselling.

I have been teaching mindfulness and meditation to adults, teens, and kids since 2016. During that time, I moved home again, shut down my party business, opened and closed a meditation studio, managed events for high-profile speakers (including the Obamas), and lost that events job due to Covid.

I may not have done all these things with complete grace, but I credit my ability to transition through all of it without falling apart or contemplating drowning in a bottle, to my meditation practice.

It has not only made me feel calmer, more peaceful, and resilient, but it has also increased my clarity, creativity, productivity, and focus. It's also given me the patience and compassion needed to look after two teens and a grandmother with dementia.

I enjoy bringing the practical applications of mindfulness and meditation to the home and the workplace, by educating others, and demonstrating the profound mental, emotional and physical benefits it can have in your day-to-day life.

As well as offering workshops, programs, and online courses, I facilitate mindfulness meditation programs for Mindfulness Works Australia and run community classes as part of the council's Healthy Sunshine Coast Program.

I am a member of the Australian Meditation Association and mindful.org and a Veriditas trained and certificated labyrinth facilitator.