Relaxation Skills: “Belly Breathing”

Learning deep breathing is the first step in learning relaxation skills. Being in pain can often lead us into unhelpful breathing habits. However, with a bit of practice changing how you breathe can make a real difference to how you feel. The first thing to do is to become more aware of how you tend to breathe.

Check your breathing right now!

• Put one hand on your chest.
• Put the other just below your ribcage resting on your tummy.
• Just let your hands rest there for a few moments while you take a few slow deep breaths.
• Notice which hand moves the most.

**Your top hand moves the most:** You are a ‘Chest Breather’. People who are tense and in pain often breathe using only the top part of their lungs and often tend to ‘hold’ the breath. This is not so good for relaxing and can be linked to muscle tension in the shoulders and neck and tightness in the chest.

**Your bottom hand moves the most:** You are a ‘Belly Breather’ or ‘Diaphragm Breather’. This type of deep breathing is the best breathing pattern to give you pain and stress relief. In deep breathing, you are aiming to breathe right down into the bottom of your lungs. The big band of muscle that is underneath the lungs, called the diaphragm, then pushes down and this makes the belly expand.
Belly breathing

1. Belly out
2. Inhale

2. Exhale
1. Belly in

‘Belly breathing’
Belly Breathing Practice

• Make yourself comfortable on the bed or in a chair. Loosen your shoulders and any tight clothing around your waist.

• Take slow, gentle deep breaths down into the bottom of your lungs - as if you are blowing up a balloon in your belly.

• Breathe slowly and don’t try to force it. You might find it helpful to count – breathe in for the count of 4 seconds and out for the count of 4 seconds. As you get the hang of it, try and slow it down even further. Find a pace that works for you.

• Remember, your belly should be moving more than the top of your chest.

• If you feel a bit dizzy or spacey it simply means you are breathing too fast and too heavily. Try breathing a bit more gently and slowly. Imagine that you are breathing out tension and tightness with each breath out.

• Practice this at least 5 minutes every day
**Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)**

Through practising tensing and relaxing our muscles, PMR increases our awareness of how it feels for your muscles to be in these two different states of tension and relaxation. This can help us recognise when we are holding tension in our body and we can practise letting go of this.

PMR is not meant to require great effort- the aim is to tense the muscles slowly and gently. If, when you tense certain muscle groups, it aggravates your pain then just practise the ‘relax’ part of the sequence. You can do this exercise either sitting or lying down. Begin by closing your eyes and take a few minutes to practise the deep breathing exercise above.

For each muscle group hold the tension for a few seconds and then relax for approximately 5 seconds, repeating this a couple of times. It can be helpful to say to yourself something like ‘relax’ or ‘let go’ as you relax the muscle.
PMR Relaxation Sequence

1. Feet
Curl your toes downwards, then let go.

2. Lower legs
Pull your toes towards you to get a stretch down your calf muscles, then let go.

3. Upper leg
Tighten your thighs, then let go.

4. Hands
Make fists with your hands then uncurl and let go.

5. Arms
Tighten your arm muscles by pulling your forearms up towards your shoulder, whilst making a fist and then move your forearms down again and uncurl your fist.

6. Buttocks/hips
Squeeze your buttock muscles and then relax them.

7. Stomach
Gently pull your stomach in/tighten your abdominal muscles and then let your stomach muscles go soft.

8. Chest
Tighten the muscles in your chest by taking in a deep breath and then exhale.

9. Shoulder Blades/back
Push your shoulder blades together, pushing out your chest.

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10. Shoulders
Raise your shoulders up to your neck and then let them slowly drop down again.

11. Mouth/jaw
Open your mouth wide, as far as you can, as if yawning and then slowly let your mouth close.

12. Eyes/cheeks
Squeeze your eyes shut and then slowly let them open again.

13. Eyebrows
Push your eyebrows together as though frowning and then let the frown go.

When you have been through all of the various areas of your body you should, hopefully, be feeling relaxed. Take a couple of minutes to enjoy this feeling before getting up. If you are feeling under a lot of pressure you can repeat these exercises two or three times a day, otherwise, once a day will be enough to help you feel calm.
Resources

- Guided audio tracks for breathing exercises and progressive muscle relaxation can be downloaded at:
  http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/download-relaxation-exercises.aspx

- Progressive muscle relaxation mp3:
  https://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/downloads/progressivemuscularrelaxation.mp3

Apps

Calm provides people experiencing stress and anxiety with guided meditations, sleep stories, breathing programs, and relaxing music.

Breath Ball is another great breathing apps which provides stress relief breathing exercise.

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