

## Relaxation after a Brain Injury

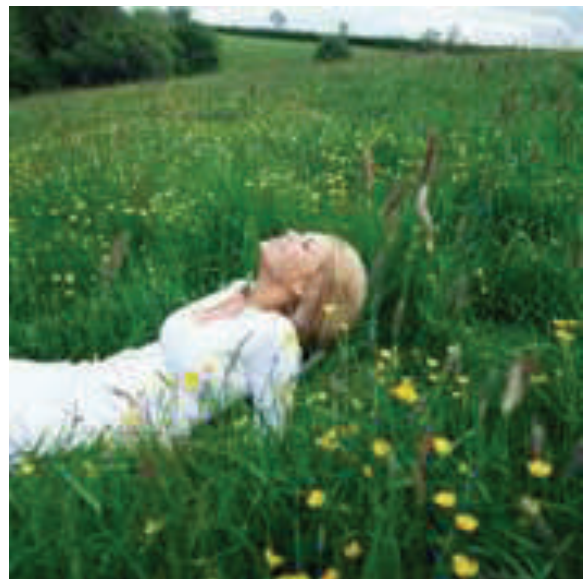
Following an acquired brain injury (ABI), many people find themselves more worried than usual, or being irritated by even the smallest things. People might tell you to “just relax”, but sometimes this is easier said than done.

Being anxious or stressed is a normal experience. Sometimes, though, we can feel like it’s getting out of hand, and that might be when relaxation techniques come in handy. Learning how to relax is a skill, and can be very useful if you practice it. There are two key parts of effective relaxation. They are: **breathing**; and **muscle relaxation**. It may be easier to practice each part alone, before trying them together.

### How do you know if you are anxious or stressed?

- Is your heart racing?
- Are you worried about lots of things?
- Are your muscles tense?
- Is your breathing fast or shallow?
- Are your palms sweaty?

Answering yes to any or all of these questions is an indication that you may be experiencing a level of anxiety or stress.



### Controlling your Breathing

We breathe in oxygen, and breathe out carbon dioxide. The body needs a balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to run efficiently. When we are anxious, this balance is disrupted, and we can feel dizzy, light-headed, confused, breathless, tingly, and have cold clammy hands. The normal rate of breathing is 10-12 breaths per minute. What’s your breathing rate?

Gaining control over your breathing involves slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. By doing this, you can reduce your anxiety. With enough practice, you can even help reduce your anxiety when you are in a stressful situation.

## Breathing to Relax

Try to practice this technique once or twice a day, at a time when you are free from distraction and able to relax.

- Make sure you are sitting on a comfortable chair, or lying on a bed
- Use a stomach breathing style rather than a chest breathing style. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Loosen any tight clothing and take off shoes, jewellery, glasses, etc.
- Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day.



### Lets Practice a Breathing Technique

- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the 'bottom' of your lungs – send the air down into your lungs as low or as deeply as you can.
- When you've taken a full breath, pause for a moment.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth. Be sure to exhale fully, allowing your body to go loose.
- Now repeat this so that you do a "set" of 10 slow, full abdominal breaths (as described).
- Keep your breathing *slow* and *regular*, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once.
- Do 2 or 3 'sets' of abdominal breaths.
- Five full minutes of this breathing exercise will have a strong effect in reducing anxiety.

## Muscle Relaxation

One of the body's reactions to fear and anxiety is muscle tension. You might feel aches and pains in your muscles, or just generally tense. After a while, you might feel exhausted. Sometimes though, we don't even notice our muscles are tense. When your muscles are relaxed, you will feel calmer overall.

## When Practicing Muscle Relaxation remember these things:

- Give yourself permission to relax
- Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about any possible physical limitations
- Try to be in a quiet, safe, comfortable environment
- Relaxing involves tensing and then relaxing each muscle group
- Make sure you can feel tension, but not pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds and then **RELAX**.
- When relaxing each particular muscle group, it may be helpful to say something like “*relax*” or “*calm*” as you relax the muscle.



### Practice!

Only through practising can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.

## Muscle Relaxation Sequence

Part of Body	Tense – Keep muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds	Relax
1 Right hand and forearm	Make a fist with your right hand	Relax
2 Right upper arm	Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”	Relax
3 Left hand and forearm	Tense	Relax
4 Left upper arm	Tense	Relax
5 Forehead	Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as if you were surprised by something	Relax
6 Eyes and cheeks	Squeeze your eyes tightly shut	Relax
7 Mouth and jaw	Open your mouth as wide as you can, as if you are yawning	Relax
8 Neck	Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, like you are looking up to the ceiling	Relax
9 Shoulders	Tense your shoulder muscles as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears	Relax
10 Shoulder blades and back	Push your shoulder blades together, so that your chest is pushed forward	Relax
11 Chest and stomach	Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs with air	Relax
12 Hips and buttocks	Squeeze your buttock muscles tightly	Relax
13 Right upper leg	Tighten your right thigh	Relax
14 Right lower leg	Do this slowly to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you, stretching the calf muscle	Relax
15 Right foot	Curl your toes downwards	Relax
16 Left upper leg	Tense	Relax
17 Left lower leg	Tense	Relax
18 Left foot	Tense	Relax

## Where to go for Extra Resources for Relaxation?

- Relaxation Centre of Queensland offers a wide variety of courses, events, and information. They have an extensive library of resources covering many areas including communication skills, relationships, relaxation, personal development and growth. Their website address is:  
<http://www.relaxationcentreqld.com.au/news.htm>
- Talk to your case manager, psychologist or rehabilitation professional for suggestions and resources to find the best way for you to relax!
- Your local library will have books and DVD's on stress management and relaxation
- Look for leisure and recreational activities that you will find fun and relaxing.  
**For ideas try some of these:**
  - Brisbane City Council "What's On" site – information re sports, recreation and community activities throughout Brisbane:  
<http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/facilities-recreation/Whats-on/index.htm>  
or Ph: 3403 8888
  - Reclink offers a range of social and recreational activities  
<http://www.reclink.org>
  - Sporting Wheelies provide sport and recreational activities. Contact:  
Ph: 3253 3333
  - Access Arts have a range of art programs at reasonable cost. Contact  
Ph: 3358 6620

