

'The time to relax is when you don't have any time'

– Sydney Harris –

■ Why is relaxation helpful?

- ❶ When we are stressed, the muscles in our bodies tense up and this muscular tension causes uncomfortable bodily feelings, such as headache, backache, tight chest and so on.
- ❷ These aches and pains of tension can cause mental worry, making us even more anxious and tense.
- ❸ People who are tense often feel tired.
- ❹ Relaxing slows down the systems in the body that speed up when we get anxious.
- ❺ If we can learn to turn on the bodily symptoms of relaxation we can turn off the symptoms of tension. They are two sides of the same coin: you can't experience feelings of relaxation and tension at the same time.

■ Relaxation is a skill

The ability to relax is not always something which comes naturally, it is a skill which has to be learnt like playing the piano. The following exercises are designed to help you learn to relax. The Progressive Muscle Relaxation exercise (p11) is quite long and you may obtain a tape of instructions to help you to carry out the routine. When you are able to relax using the first exercise, you can begin to shorten the routine. This should be done gradually until you are able to relax at will, as you need to.

General guidelines

- ❶ Try to decide in advance when you are going to practice; in this way you can better develop a routine which you can stick to. Make time for yourself.
- ❷ Make sure that you choose somewhere quiet to exercise, and make sure that no one will disturb you during your practice.
- ❸ Don't attempt your exercise if you are hungry or have just eaten, or if the room is too hot or too chilly.
- ❹ Try to adopt a 'passive' attitude, that is, do not worry about your performance or whether you are successfully relaxing. Just 'have a go' and let it happen.
- ❺ Try to breathe through your nose, using your stomach muscles. Try to breathe slowly and regularly. It is important that you do not take a lot of quick, deep breaths as this can make you feel dizzy or faint and even make your tension worse. When you place your hands on your stomach, you will feel the movement if you are breathing properly. Try this out before you exercise, to make sure that you are used to the feeling.

■ Relaxation in everyday life

- ❶ Stop rushing around – you achieve more by doing things calmly.
- ❷ Give yourself short breaks – relax, stretch, go for a walk.
- ❸ Adopt a relaxed posture. Deliberately relax if you notice yourself tensing up. Drop your shoulders, sit back in your chairs, unclench your fists.
- ❹ Inject pleasure and treats into your daily routine.