

Relaxation in the context of persistent pain

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The Relaxation Response is a helpful way to engage another part of our nervous system – the relaxation part, or our parasympathetic nervous system. Engaging this system, dampens down the fight or flight response and brings our autonomic nervous system into homeostasis - allowing metabolism, heart rate, breathing rate, muscle tension, and blood pressure to return to normal levels. Regular use of the Relaxation Response sets up our pain protection system to be less protective; if our body is in a relaxed state, this will help our brain decide that we are in a state of safety. The more you practice the more easily your body will relax, and the more you are re-wiring your nervous system – encouraging it to activate in this way, more often

Learning the Relaxation Response is essential for managing pain. It is recommended that you practice the Relaxation Response 1-2 times each day.

There are many methods, which can elicit the Relaxation Response, for example:

- Passive muscle relaxation;
- Progressive muscle relaxation;
- Autogenic relaxation;
- Visualization;
- A variety of breathing techniques; and
- Yoga.

Four important parts of facilitating relaxation:

1. A comfortable place where muscles can relax
2. A focus of attention
3. Passive disregard for everyday thoughts
4. A quiet place with minimal distractions

The optimal position is the one that is the most comfortable for you.

1. Options for Relaxing positions when sitting up:

- You may want to try leaning forward onto a table, placing pillows or a bolster on it for your arms and head to rest on. You could also place pillows on your lap so when you lean forward your spine is also supported;
- If you don't want to lean forward, place both feet on the ground, hands comfortably supported on your lap or the arms or the chair, spine in a comfortable straight position;
- You could place one hand on your belly and one on your chest;
- Chin in a neutral position -not pointing up or down, and the crown of the head reaching towards the ceiling. You could place a pillow or a rolled up towel in your lumbar area:
- Close your eyes if this is comfortable, if not allow your gaze to be soft

2. Options for Relaxing positions when lying down:

- Find a comfortable position where your entire body is supported
- Try bending your knees and placing a bolster or pillows under your knees
- Legs could be elevated up a wall or on a chair or extended
- Support your head and neck with a pillow or rolled up blanket, allowing your spine to be in a natural, neutral position, optimally don't have your chin facing up or downward
- You could have a small blanket below your lower spine
- You could place a weighted bean bag on your pelvis
- You could try covering your eyes with an eye pillow or a small cloth
- You could put a blanket over yourself
- You could have your hands extended and palms open with or without beanbags
- You could have one hand on your belly and the other one on your chest
- When your mind naturally wanders, bring your attention back to your breathing
- Close your eyes if this is comfortable, if not allow your gaze to be soft
- You could also explore lying on your stomach making sure your body is supported in the most comfortable way for yourself, try putting a pillow under your stomach, bending one leg, and resting your arms above your head on a pillow