



gmt psychology



learning...skills...knowledge

Relaxation Techniques

Surprisingly, relaxation is an under-valued mental skill that, with practice, delivers many well-being and performance benefits to those who learn the technique. Acquiring this simple skill is beneficial because it's often difficult to relax, even when it's what we want or need to do most. The body and the mind don't always respond on cue! Like so many things, habit and practise are the keys to true relaxation, and effective relaxation opens the door to mindfulness. If you have a friend - with a calming voice - who is willing to talk you through the process below, that can be helpful, but is not essential.

Environment

Find a quiet place, preferably where you can lie down. If you have a time constraint, set a timer or phone alarm (with a gentle alarm tone!), so that you don't have to check a clock or feel anxious about your schedule. Using music of a given length can also provide a gentle "timer" to your session. Calming music or "white" noise may also help in the relaxation process, particularly if this helps to mask background noise you can't control. Rainforest or ocean soundtracks are readily available and helpful; otherwise, try music that doesn't vary significantly or have words. (The Irish musician, Enya, is one that comes to mind.)

Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) assists in isolating muscles we don't even realize are tense, and systematically relaxing them. The process involves tensing and releasing a set of muscles in turn. Start with the foot, tensing the muscles for a few seconds, then consciously releasing the muscle tension. Work your way from the foot up the leg, then target the hands, arms and torso. In time, when you are more practised in this technique, you'll be able to simply work through the release phase to relax your muscles, without tensing the muscles first. Another method you might try (particularly if you're prone to cramps) is to imagine your leg, for example, is very heavy and sinking into the floor or mat.

Breathing

As tension accumulates in our bodies, we don't realize our breathing becomes shallower and concentrated in the chest. To relax fully, we need to take full breaths that reach down into the abdominal cavity. Focus on a smooth transition between inhaling and exhaling, gradually finding a slow, natural rhythm.

Positive Affirmations and Imagery

Once your body is calm and relaxed, the mind is still free to wander to unhelpful thoughts! While learning the relaxation process, therefore, it's important to ensure the mind has something soothing to focus on. Appropriate music may be sufficient, but most likely you will also need some appropriate mental imagery. A particular scene (the beach, wilderness, or a favourite place) is a good idea. You may also like to repeat positive and calming phrases to yourself, for example: 'I feel relaxed', 'I feel worthy', 'I believe in myself', 'I am at peace'.