

Muscle relaxation a matter of practice

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As several articles have dealt with the subject of stress and some of its effects, it is felt a continuation, but in a slightly different direction, is appropriate. Mainly, the focus of this article will be on one of the many methods of relaxation training. However, before explaining this method a few cautions are needed. If you have diabetes this method of relaxation training should not be used. Also, individuals with epilepsy should avoid it. Since this method involves the exertion of muscular tension, a person with a recent muscle, tendon, or ligament injury should avoid those injured muscle groups. Otherwise, this method could be used on uninjured areas.

When you begin using this type of relaxation, the deep muscle type, that is, you may experience some unusual or even alarming sensations. Don't worry, however. Some of these experiences are normal and part of the process of discovering and experiencing a state of relaxation. Some individuals say that they experience a floating or even a numb feeling. Others state feeling slightly dizzy or light-headed. There may be some sensation of tingling. Some individuals report a feeling of warmth and/or heaviness in their limbs. Again, these are normal sensations that may or may not occur while training using deep muscle relaxation.

The first step in this method is to find a quiet, calm, and peaceful environment. However, since this method is more physically involved, noises don't affect one's concentration as much as with other methods of relaxation. Therefore, a totally quiet and peaceful environment is not critical

but would be nice. Next, plan for approximately 20 to 30 minutes to perform this exercise. The longer, the better.

Some people prefer to practice in the morning before the children are up or maybe after they've gone out or to school. Others would rather practice in the evening, say after work or after dinner. However, it is best not to practice at bedtime. This is not a rule, but it is advisable because the aim is to learn the feeling of relaxation. Therefore, if you practice at bedtime you may fall asleep and miss the experience; the warm, deep feelings of relaxation.

After you have decided upon a place and a time, get comfortable by either lying on the floor or bed. Place pillows under the head and, if you prefer, under your arms. If you have a good comfortable chair, such as a recliner, you may prefer to practice here rather than lying down. The point is to get comfortable wherever you choose.

This exercise involves tightening, or tensing specified muscle groups and slowly releasing that tension. The aim is to notice the difference between a tense, rigid muscle, and a relaxed, tension/free muscle.

The exercise described here will start at the bottom and work up: start at the feet and work up to the head. This doesn't have to be the way and if you'd prefer, you could start at the top and work down. But for the purposes of this article, we'll start at the bottom, the feet, and go from there.

Let the heels of your feet remain on the floor and at the same time bend your feet upward as far as they will go, bringing your toes up toward your knees. Focus on the feel-

ing of tenseness in your lower legs and hold this for several moments. Then, gradually release the tension and allow your feet to return to a natural position. Before moving to the next part of the exercise, allow yourself a couple of moments to focus and feel the feeling of a relaxed state in the muscles.

Next, tighten your thigh muscles as tight as they will go, again holding them several moments before slowly releasing the tension. As stated before, focus your attention on the feeling of tenseness in the muscle and when you start to release the tension the feeling of relaxation and possible heaviness and warmth. Next, wait a few moments before starting into the next muscle group.

This exercise will give you an awareness of the muscles in your abdomen. Tense them up as though you were expecting someone to punch you in the belly. Hold them tightly for several seconds and then slowly relax the tension.

As you keep relaxing, you will find that even breathing contributes greatly to relaxation. Take several calm, medium-size breaths and notice how the muscles of your shoulders, chest, and arms seem to loosen during the exhalation half of breathing. When you're focusing on your breathing, a simple rule might be to increase your exhale twice the amount of time your twice the amount of time of your inhaling breath. (For example, if it takes you three seconds in order to exhale.) You may want to try several repetitions of this breathing exercise before moving to the next set of muscular exercises.

Moving up the body, the focus now will be on the

shoulders. Shrug your shoulders, trying to touch your ears with your shoulders. Hold this for several moments and slowly relax the muscular tension allowing your shoulders to return to a natural position. Again, notice the difference between the tension which you experienced when your shoulders were shrugged and the relaxation that has occurred when the tension was released.

In order to induce muscular tension in the neck, you can press your chin downward as far as it will go touching your chest. Again, hold this for several seconds, focus on the tenseness, then slowly relax the muscles.

In facial exercises, you can induce muscular tension by

making funny faces. You may want to clamp your eyelids together very tightly and then releasing them. Another way is to clench your jaws very tightly, then feeling the tension in the jaw muscles.

The above set of exercises, is a simplified form of a deep muscle relaxation training technique. There is much more detail involved with teaching deep muscle relaxation, but you can experiment on your own using the tension/release method with various muscle groups in order to induce a state of relaxation. Hopefully, with a little time, practice, and effort learning this simple technique of relaxation can help reduce stress which we all experience in our daily lives.