

The habit of relaxation

By Sarah Bolitho

Just relax! For many of us, relaxation is not only way down our 'to do' list, but we also aren't quite sure how to do it. And if we don't know how to relax, it's going to be hard to create a habit.

Let's start with what relaxation is – basically, it's a state of low tension in our body and mind, ideally with an absence or minimisation of any external stimuli. It is a skill, and like all skills it takes practice, but it is worth doing as it has so many benefits, both physiologically and psychologically.

There are many relaxation methods but, if you are new to the practice, follow these six simple steps for a few weeks to help get into a habit. Then start to try different methods to see which you prefer.

1. Create a regular time slot to practise, as this will get you into the habit more easily. Before or after a meal, after a walk or workout, or while you wait for a hot drink to cool are good as they link to an already established habit.
2. Start by sitting or lying comfortably where you won't be disturbed, then simply focus on your breathing for one minute. Then slow your breathing down slightly and count 10 slow breaths. As you do this, you may notice your thoughts – let them pass and park them 'for later', bringing your focus back to your breathing. If your thoughts keep intruding, gently end your practice.
3. When you feel comfortable, start to lengthen your practice by 30 seconds every few days. Set a timer to keep track of time – this also stops you checking your watch!
4. When you can relax comfortably for a few minutes, add in a body scan. Scan through your body slowly (head to toes or toes to head), focus on any tension as you breathe in, then visualise the muscles relaxing as you breathe out.
5. You can say a mantra or affirmation in your head. Make it something simple that you repeat as you breathe: "I am still"; "I give my body the time to rest"; "in stillness I recharge"; anything that feels calming.
6. Finally, lengthen the time, gradually building up to whatever feels comfortable or fits your life: five minutes or 50 – it all counts.

However long you relax for, remember to ease out gently. Take one or two deep breaths, then gently sit up, wriggle your fingers and toes and give your body a shake to revitalise you.

Remember, it takes time to develop new habits, so start with one minute once a day and build up gradually until you find the right relaxation time for you. It can take upwards of 21 days to create a new habit and 60 or more days to make it permanent. When it's something that involves stillness rather than activity, it can be harder to do, but keep going and always celebrate your progress.