

# INSOMNIA MANAGEMENT - 3

## Relaxation Therapy

*Most people meet situations every day that can cause stress, worry, anxiety or frustration. These feelings can affect the ability to fall or stay asleep because they do not allow the body to relax or wind down.*

*Since we are often unable to control the triggers that cause these feelings it is important to learn ways to reduce the effects to get a good night's sleep.*

*Developing an evening relaxation routine can help people to wind down before going to bed. Many people find that doing well practiced relaxation exercises for ten minutes after going to bed and when waking during the night, helps them get to sleep.*

## Relaxation Techniques

There are many relaxation techniques available. Some focus on physical tension (i.e. muscles feel tense and tight, breathing is fast and shallow) and others on an active mind. In this handbook there are two simple but effective techniques explained that can help reduce stress and anxiety and encourage sleep. It is important to feel comfortable with the technique chosen.

Relaxation techniques to help you get to sleep should be well practiced before using them. You should not expect to be perfect or even very effective with it at first.

It is important to note that three to four percent of people experience an anxiety response to relaxation methods. For some, this reaction comes from a feeling that they are losing control as they begin to enter a state of relaxation. This anxiety response should reduce with practice and the knowledge that nothing bad happens.

### Progressive Muscle Relaxation (Passive)

If you experience physical tension, a passive, progressive, muscle relaxation technique may help you to relax and be more open to sleep. Progressive muscle relaxation is simple and quick to learn.

- Focus on each part of the body separately starting with the hands and fingers.
- The muscles in the hand are relaxed and allowed to become gradually heavier and looser.
- A slow deep breath is taken in and then slowly exhaled.
- Breathing is then returned to normal.
- Repeat this technique for the next part of your body. (eg arms and shoulders)

The feeling of tension then slowly lessens in each of the muscle groups.

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### Muscle groups:

- Hands/fingers
- Arms/shoulders
- Neck/head
- Face/eyes/jaw
- Stomach/back
- Legs/feet

### Mental Imagery

Mental imagery can be an effective technique to stop an active mind. The technique is designed to occupy the mind and prevent troubling thoughts from arising long enough to permit sleep to arrive. Images in the mind can affect how we feel and even how the body behaves physiologically.

Before starting it is important to take a few deep relaxing breaths and let the body become limp against the bed. Then:

- imagine a pleasant and restful familiar scene such as resting by a river on a warm spring day
- it is important to see the sights, hear the sounds, smell the scents and feel the sensations
- maintain the image as continuously as possible until sleep arrives.

At first, you may not be able to hold the image very long before other thoughts enter your mind. Do not be discouraged by this – expect it. Just recover your image and continue again, holding it for as long as possible. With increasing skill, you will be able to hold the image for longer and longer uninterrupted periods.

There are many reasons why we are unable to relax, some may be one-off situations and others may be ongoing. Learning to manage our response to those stressful situations will give us confidence in our ability to cope and reduce their impact on our sleep.

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*The following Good Relaxation Guide provides strategies you can use to help you deal with physical and mental tension, worry, difficult situations and problem solving. All of these are common causes of sleep difficulties.*

### **Good Relaxation Guide**

#### **Dealing with physical tension**

- Value times of relaxation by thinking of them as essential, not extras. Give relaxation some of your best time, not what is left over.
- Build relaxing things into your lifestyle everyday. Do not rush, enjoy them.
- Learn a relaxation routine but do not expect to improve or gain results without practice. Try to develop this as a skill.
- There are many relaxation routines available, especially on audio-tape. These can help you reduce muscle tension and learn how to use breathing to help you relax.
- Tension can show in many different ways – aches, stiffness, heart racing, perspiration, stomach churning etc. Do not be worried about this, it is a natural biological response to mild worry or frustration.
- Keep fit. Physical exercise such as a regular brisk walk or a swim can help to relieve tension.

#### **Dealing with frustration or racing thoughts**

- Do not try too hard to fall asleep.
- Accept that sleep will come, when it is ready and that relaxing in bed is almost as good for your body and mind.
- Try to keep your eyes open in the darkened room and as they (naturally) try to close – tell yourself to resist for another few seconds. This procedure ‘tempts’ sleep to take over.
- Try to ignore irrelevant ideas and thoughts.
- Visualise a pleasing scene (mental imagery) or try silently repeating a simple word such as ‘the’ every few seconds.

#### **Dealing with worry**

- Accept that worry can be normal and it can be useful. Some people worry more than others, but we all worry at some time.
- Write down your concerns. Decide which ones are more important by rating each out of ten.
- Work out a plan of action for each problem.
- Share your worries. Your friends or your doctor can give you helpful advice.
- Keep your mind active and positive by doing crosswords, reading, a hobby or an interest.

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- You can block out worrying thoughts by mentally repeating a comforting phrase.
- Practice enjoying quiet moments, eg listening relaxing music. Allow your mind to wander and try to picture yourself in pleasant and enjoyable situations.
- Reward yourself for your successes. Share your success with others, as we all need encouragement.
- Your symptoms may return as you face up to difficult situations. However, keep trying, as they should become less troublesome as your confidence grows.
- Everyone has good and bad days. Expect to have more good days as time goes on.

### **General strategies for solving problems**

Below is a planning technique that you may find helpful to carry out each evening.

- Set aside 20 minutes in early evening after your meal.
- Sit in a quiet room. Have a pencil and notepad at hand.
- Treat this session as the pivotal point between day activities and evening time.
- Reflect on the day. Consider all you have achieved. Encourage and reward yourself for those achievements.
- Consider problem areas and loose ends.
- Reallocate time during the next day to deal with them. Do not do the actual work. Write down the decisions reached.
- Consider also any other matters that may intrude on the sleep period, eg emotional, financial, or other worries. Write down the first or next positive step of action to take and when you will take it.
- If when in bed new thoughts intrude, resolve to deal with them the next day.

Try to put together a program using elements of the above Good Relaxation Guide, to meet your needs and situation.

Remember that guidance and advice is available through your doctor if you need further help.