

ASSERT YOURSELF!



Module Five

Reducing Physical Tension

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Physical Tension

When we are communicating in a passive or aggressive way we are often feeling anxious or angry and this can be reflected in our bodies. We can become tense in our shoulders, necks, jaw or through our entire body. Over time this tension can build up to the point where we can get headaches, backaches, stomach problems, in fact a whole range of physical problems. We also find it increasingly difficult to relax. To communicate assertively we must be able to control the arousal and tension that our bodies may feel when we are in difficult situations or situations in which we feel uncomfortable.

Identifying Physical Tension

The first step in reducing physical tension is to identify where you hold it in your body. Have a look at the following table. Put a tick against each area that you feel tension in right now.

Body Area	Tension (tick if yes)
Scalp	
Forehead	
Eyes	
Temples	
Jaw	
Neck	
Shoulders	
Chest	
Upper arms	
Lower arms	
Hands	
Stomach	
Lower back	
Buttocks	
Thighs	
Calves	
Feet	

See if you can notice any patterns in the areas of tension. Are you mostly tense in your stomach and lower back, in your arms and legs, or around your neck and shoulders? You may want to repeat this exercise when you are in a more stressful situation to see if you are tense in the same areas or different ones.

Reducing Physical Tension

Once people start to pay attention to their tension they are often surprised at how tense they really are. The good news is that there are a number of relaxation techniques that can be used to reduce physical tension. As with all the skills you are learning in these modules the more you practice them the more impact they will have for you.

There are a number of techniques you can use to reduce physical tension. Some of these are listed below:

- Exercise
- Massage
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Yoga
- Meditation
- Guided Visualisation
- Slow breathing
- Tai chi

See if you can think of some activities that you know reduce your levels of tension and list them below. These may be the techniques or activities listed above or they may be more personal activities that you know reduce your tension such as listening to music or soaking in a bath. While you are working through the rest of the modules see if you can do one of these tension reducing activities and exercises daily!

In the rest of this module we will introduce you to some of the techniques that you may not have come across before.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation or PMR works through each of the muscle groups in progression. If we just try and relax muscles that have been tense for a while it can be difficult to get them to relax. Try it now. Try and just relax the muscles in your shoulders by

telling yourself to relax. Most people find this very difficult to do. PMR works by first tensing and then relaxing the muscles. Tensing the muscle first teaches you how to take control of the muscle and recognise the tension. Try it now with your shoulders. Lift your shoulders up as high as you can and try to touch your ears with them. Hold that for 10 seconds. Now let them drop and feel the sensation of relaxation. This tensing and relaxing is followed for each of the major muscle groups.

Follow each of the steps below for the different muscle groups. As we move through each body part you can use the same pattern of tensing and relaxing. When tensing a body part hold the tension for about 10 seconds. Then let the tension go and wait for another 10 seconds before you tense again. You may notice that you tend to breathe in as you tense and breathe out as you relax. This is the natural rhythm of the body and it is easiest if you keep following this. Breathe in as you tense, and breathe out as you relax. You may want to make a recording talking yourself through each muscle group so you can follow it without having to keep referring to the handout.

First, get into a comfortable position in a chair. It is better to do these exercises sitting up to prevent you from falling asleep. To work through the whole exercise should take about 15 to 20 minutes.

Put both your feet flat on the floor and rest your hands gently on your legs. Allow your eyes to gently close. Become aware of the weight of your body, of your head, your shoulders, your arms, and your legs.

Now clench your right fist tightly, noticing the tension as you do. Clench it tighter and notice the tension in your fist, hand and forearm. Now let go of the fist and relax your hand. Notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat this with your right fist. Then repeat with your left fist. Then tense both fists together.

Now tense your lower arm muscles by lowering your hand. Bend it down at the wrist as though trying to touch the underside of your arm. Then relax the muscles by straightening the wrist again. Repeat.

Now bend your elbows and tense your biceps. Tense them as hard as you can. Feel the tension. Then relax and straighten out your arms. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your shoulders. Tense your shoulders by lifting them up to try and touch your ears. Now relax by dropping them. Repeat. Now pull your shoulders forward while leaving your arms by your side. Hold and then relax by letting your shoulders go back to their normal position.

Now move your attention to your neck. If you have a sore neck or a neck injury, check with your doctor or physiotherapist before doing this exercise. Gently lean your head to the left until you feel the muscles tighten in the right side of your neck. Slowly roll your head forward around to the right and then slowly back to the left. This exercise should not cause any pain. If you feel pain you are stretching the muscles too tightly, and you need to be a little gentler. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your head. Wrinkle your forehead as tightly as you can. It can help to lift you eyebrows. Hold this for 10 seconds and then relax. Now squint your eyes and hold that tension for 10 seconds. Relax, and then repeat. Now clench your jaw by biting your teeth together. Then unclench them and relax. When your jaw is relaxed your lips will be slightly parted. Really notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. Repeat. Now press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Then relax and let your tongue fall to the floor of your mouth. Repeat. Now press your lips together then purse them into an “O” shape. Relax your lips. Repeat. Make sure that the rest of your face is still relaxed.

Now move your attention to your chest. Breathe in and fill your lungs completely and tense your chest muscles. Hold and then let your breath go completely and your muscles relax. Make sure your lungs are empty before you take in the next breath. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your stomach. Tighten your stomach and hold. Note the tension then relax. Now place your hand on your stomach. Breathe deeply into your stomach so that your hand is pushed out. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Now arch your back while keeping your head tilted forward. Feel the tension in your lower back. Hold then relax

and sit up straight again. Repeat. Now tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. You should rise in the chair slightly. Hold and then relax. Repeat.

Now move your attention to your legs. Tense your thighs by pressing your heels into the floor as hard as you can. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Tense your calves by lifting your toes towards your shin. Hold and then relax. Repeat. Tense your feet by curling your toes into the floor. Hold and then relax. Repeat.

When you have finished it is a good idea to stay sitting for a few minutes to really appreciate the sensation of relaxation. Try not to stand up too quickly as you may tense up again. Also your blood pressure drops when you relax, so if you stand up too quickly you may get dizzy.

Mini Relaxation 1

The more you practise the full PMR the more you will get to know the areas in your body that become tense. However, you won't always have 15 to 20 minutes to practice the whole exercise. In this case you can modify the exercise by just choosing the muscle groups that you know are tense and relaxing these.

Mini Relaxation 2

Alternatively you could try this mini-relaxation exercise:

1. Stand up.
2. Lips closed, jaw relaxed, breathe slow and low down in your stomach
3. Breathe in for 2 seconds and out for 3 seconds. Be aware of your breathing for the whole exercise and keep it slow and deep.
4. Cross one of your legs over the other leg, keeping your feet firmly planted on the ground. Try to place your feet even with each other.
5. Put both your hands behind your back and grasp your hands. Now twist your hands so that your palms are now facing the floor.
6. Keeping your hands together and your arms straight, gently raise your arms toward your head.
7. Notice the increase in tension in ALL of your different muscles. Hold all this for a

count of 5.

8. Now uncross your legs and return your arms to your sides. Take two or three breaths to let go of all the tension.
9. Repeat steps '3' to '8' until you feel relaxed.

Slow Breathing Technique

Sit comfortably with your arms and legs uncrossed, your feet flat on the floor and your hands gently resting in your lap. You may find it easier to close your eyes while you are doing this exercise.

Use your nose rather than your mouth to breathe. Start by just observing your breath. Note the quality of your breath as you inhale and exhale.

Now try to slowly lengthen each inhalation by drawing your breath down towards the abdominal area in a smooth and steady fashion. Have a brief pause before you observe the slow smooth and steady fashion in which your breath is released as you exhale.

Now that you are paying attention to your breath, you can begin the counting rhythm of breathing in for three seconds and out for three seconds. This will produce a breathing rate of 10 breaths per minute. (A normal breathing rate is 10-14 breaths per minute.)

Try to maintain this slow, even and controlled rhythm in your breathing by continuing to count in your head. Try not to speed up the count.

Keep breathing for 10 to 15 minutes using this rhythm. When you have finished gently open your eyes and take your time before you rise from the chair.

(If you suffer from panic attacks, slow breathing is particularly important to control overbreathing. In fact the breathing retraining for panic slows the breath down even further than in this exercise. Please have a look at the module on breathing and breathing physiology in the modules on panic called "Don't Panic!" on our website.)

Visualisation

Visualisation uses the power of our imagination to help reduce stress. There is a wide range of different types of visualisations. Many recordings are available if you want to try them. It is a matter of exploring until you find the one that suits and helps you. Visualisation is practiced and studied in cancer and pain centres throughout the world. Visualisation is

effective in treating many stress-related illnesses including headaches, muscle spasms, chronic pain, and anxiety. Sometimes the effects can be felt immediately and sometimes it takes several weeks of practice to feel any benefit.

Visualisation involves imagining a scene or an image as completely as you can. Sometimes people use them to help set goals. For example, athletes can use them as part of their training. They visualise the race or event they are going to be in, in minute detail. They visualise themselves in the event, imagining all the sights, tastes, sounds and smells. They imagine the difficult parts of the race and how they will overcome them. They will feel the exhaustion and imagine overcoming this.

You can use a more guided visualisation for relaxation. A common version of this is to imagine yourself in one of your favourite places or a beautiful imaginary scene. Again, imagine it in as much detail as you can - the sights, the colours, the temperature, the sounds, the smell, and the feel of your body. It is a place where you feel completely safe and relaxed. Imagine yourself completely relaxing in this place. Here there are no problems to be solved, no work to do, just relaxing.

There are no real limits as to what you can use visualisation for. However, there are some basic principles to follow. These are:

1. Loosen your clothing or wear comfortable clothing. Lie down in a quiet place and close your eyes gently.
2. Scan your body. Notice and tension and in which muscles. Relax those muscles as much as you can.
3. Begin creating mental sense impression. Involve all your senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. For example, imagine a beach. See the colours of the water, the sky, the sand. See any people around, what are they wearing, what do they look like? Smell the ocean, and the clean, fresh air. Feel the warmth of the sun on your body, feel the gentle breeze against your skin, feel the sand under your toes. Hear the waves, the sounds of the birds, other people. Taste the salt in the air.
4. Use self statements to aid your relaxation. Use the present tense and avoid negatives. For example, avoid saying: "I am not tense" which contains a negative. Try

instead: “I am letting go of tension”.

5. Visualise three times a day. Visualisation is easiest in the morning and night while lying in bed. After you have practiced for a while you will be able to visualise in most situations to help you reduce tension.

Module summary

- In order to be assertive we need to have control over the physical tension and arousal that can occur in our bodies at difficult times. Having too much physical tension can increase our stress. In extreme cases it can lead to pain and stress related illness.
- There are a number of ways to reduce physical tension. These include meditation, exercise, tai chi, massage, visualisation, yoga, progressive muscle relaxation, and slow breathing techniques.
- To reduce our stress it is important that we practice relaxation techniques on a daily basis. To find the ones that suit you, you will need to explore and practice a range of techniques.
- Many of these exercises are available as recordings which some people find easier to use. You can also make your own recordings.

Coming up:

The next module looks at why we sometimes find it hard to say “no” and how we can become better at saying “no”.

ABOUT THIS MODULE

CONTRIBUTORS

Fiona Michel (MPsych¹ PhD²).

Centre for Clinical Interventions

1Master of Psychology (Clinical Psychology) 2Doctor of Philosophy (Clinical Psychology)

Dr Anthea Fursland (PhD²)

Centre for Clinical Interventions

We would also like to thank Paula Nathan for her contribution to these modules

BACKGROUND

The concepts and strategies in the modules have been developed from evidence based psychological practice, primarily Cognitive-Behaviour Therapy (CBT). CBT is a type of psychotherapy that is based on the theory that unhelpful negative emotions and behaviours are strongly influenced by problematic cognitions (thoughts). This can be found in the following:

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“ASSERT YOURSELF”

This module forms part of:

Michel, F. (2008). *Assert Yourself*. Perth, Western Australia: Centre for Clinical Interventions.

ISBN: 0-9757995-5-X

Created: November, 2008

FURTHER READING

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