

Times of calm and relaxation are vital for all of us. There are almost no challenges in life that aren't easier to deal with when we are calm enough, and all medical conditions and mental health problems will be improved by regular times of calm and relaxation.

The most obvious examples are difficulties like pain, stress and anxiety.

The 'Big 5' ways of relaxing are:

**Connecting with other people**

**Getting absorbed in an activity**

**Exercise and other Physical Activity**

**Nature and Green Spaces**

**Breathing**

As you read this information you can think about things you've enjoyed in the past, or would like to do in the future.

### **Connecting with other people - social contact and intimacy**

Let's assume that when we say "people" we're talking about friends, people we can trust at work, or loving family members.

**talking and listening** with these people,  
**making eye contact** with them

will tend to help us feel calmer and more relaxed

It is also very relaxing to work or do some other **activity along-side other people**, and to **share a meal** especially with people we know, like and trust.

Where it is appropriate, **touch** is also very important. This ranges from simply shaking or holding hands, through things like personal care, hugs and massage, to making love.

All these activities all help us switch on systems in the brain and body that make us feel more relaxed. Connecting with other people in these ways helps us learn more, feel more trusting, and our bodies are also healthier - we tend to have lower blood pressure, heal more quickly from injuries and fight infections better.

For those that are interested in science, this is because in addition to switching on the relaxation (parasympathetic) system, all these activities increase **oxytocin**.

### **Questions:**

Do you feel part of a community? Do you have enough opportunities to give and receive attention from other people? Do you have at least one relationship in which you feel accepted and loved for who you are?

You can think about these, and other questions, by reviewing the 'emotional needs' in

**[Our Needs and Resources](#)**

### **Getting completely absorbed in doing something**

When you speak to people who are really into music, or golf, or fishing, or knitting, or long-distance walking, and many other things, you usually find that they find their whole attention is absorbed by what they are doing - it is as if nothing else exists, or as if the activity is 'doing itself'.

This "Zone" feels so good that people will spend a lot of time money and energy to 'get into' it. Sometimes people say "its as if I'm not there" - perhaps what they mean is "my thinking and imagining brain finally gave me a break and was I just in the present moment".

Giving our whole attention to something helps us escape from our thinking and imagining brain particularly when it goes into overdrive with worries, overthinking or going over upsetting experiences from the past. Getting complete absorbed in an activity helps us get **into the present moment**.

In days gone by, when people had to make and find everything they needed for themselves, and find all their food in the wild, much of their day would have been taken up with skilled absorbing activities.

**Meditation** can also have this effect - in a way meditation is getting totally absorbed in doing nothing instead of something.

**Mindfulness** is great training for paying attention to what is going on without getting caught up in thoughts and feelings, and it is also very relaxing.

Sometimes it is helpful to be distracted from your thoughts. Unfortunately television isn't the best way of doing this: most television programmes are designed to create strong emotions. Unless these are emotions you need a bit more of in your life - like laughter or fascination - then TV, like most screen-time, is best kept to a minimum.

**Beware of any activity that leaves you feeling agitated, cross, scared or despairing - be it social media, newspapers, or TV. The one thing everyone can agree on is that social media is not relaxing. It is usually even better to get completely into an activity that needs some skill, practice or concentration.**

### **Questions:**

Do you have something you are good at or enjoy doing for its own sake, something you can get totally absorbed in doing? Is there something like this you would like to do?

**The after-effects of exercise.**

Usually the relaxed feeling comes after exercise rather than during the exercise. Some other [physical activities](#) use enough energy that we can call them 'exercise' too.

When we exercise our brains produce a whole range of chemicals that have pleasant effects: endorphins and endocannabinoids make us feel good, dopamine helps us feel pleasantly motivated, and a little-known chemical called GABA makes us feel much calmer. (see box 2 ) Any activity that involves physical effort will help us feel better, including feeling more relaxed.

When we are stressed, anxious or frightened this can be even more important. When we feel like this our body is actually gearing up for really intense action - fight or flight - and when we do some exercise, particularly if it gets us out of breath and sweating, we will be 'using up' the stress. (See box 2)

**Box 1*****Drugs and Natural "Feel Good" Factors***

*We spend billions of pounds a year on drugs to have the same effects as the 'natural highs' we get from things like exercise and doing physical activities that mean something to us. Heroin, fentanyl and codeine are artificial endorphins, cannabis and synthetics like spice are fake endocannabinoids, cocaine and crack are scamming your dopamine system, and benzos, alcohol, gabapentin and sleeping tablets are hacking your GABA.*

**Box 2*****Exercise for Anxiety***

*One thing to remember, if you are a bit anxious, you may notice that when you START exercising - for example running or cycling - you may feel a little worse. This is OK because as you continue the exercise session things will improve, and you will feel much better afterwards. This 'slightly worse' feeling is caused by your breathing and heartbeat shifting for a while into a more 'fight and flight' type pattern as you start to use up a lot of energy.*

**Nature and Green Spaces**

For almost everyone, being in a space with lots of trees, plants, flowers and grass will be calming. This is particularly true if there is also some water - a pond, lake, stream, river or the sea. Even if there is no green space immediately around, it is sometimes surprising how close we may live to a park, wood, stream or other pleasant green space.

Physical activities can feel quite different if done out of doors. Outdoor exercise in nature is much more likely to become a habit, is more sociable if there are other people about, and we tend to find the exercise or activity less tiring.

**More than one way at once**

You have probably already realised that some activities - like team sports or walking with friends - are going several ways of relaxing we've already looked at: we are in a group, connecting with other people, getting completely absorbed in what we are doing and moving around in a way that leaves us feeling relaxed afterwards, perhaps in a green space. Not just this, we may also be meeting many of our other emotional needs by doing something enjoyable, fun, with some meaning and purpose.

### **Breathing**

Breathing is probably the single most **useful** way of relaxing, because once you've learnt how to do it, you can use this skill at **any time** you need it, in almost any situation.

It turns out we can deliberately switch on a natural relaxation system in our brains by using our breathing to increase GABA. Drugs like tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and 'gaba' drugs have the same effect. And even though the scientific reasons that it works are interesting and complicated, the basic pattern of breathing that does this is quite simple to describe, and there are instructions on how to do it in [Breathe Easy](#)

Once learnt this kind of breathing technique can be used in very many different situations.

Slow breathing into the belly at about 6 breaths a minute sends several kinds of signal to the brain that calm it down. This happens by switching on the same areas that are affected by alcohol, benzodiazepines or other medicines for anxiety.

**The advantage of using our breathing to boost our GABA instead of drugs is that it can be done without any side-effects, with no risk of addiction, and you don't need prescription.**

### **Is that the same thing as ...?**

*This basic breathing pattern is taught in very many different ways and called many different things. It could be called deep breathing, relaxation breathing, belly or diaphragm breathing. Other common examples include Tower or Box breathing, 4:6 and 7:11 breathing, Pramayana or 4:7:8 Breathing. They are **all** following a very similar pattern and timing.*

*Apart from the different words used to describe them, another reason they look different is that some use a quicker counting speed than others. 7:11 and 4:7:8 use counting that is about as fast as you could say the numbers out loud. Box Breathing and 4:6 breathing go along at about 'one count per second'.*

*Some styles make more deliberate use of pausing or holding the breath either at the end of the in-breath, or the end of the out breath, or both.*

*So what should be very simple suddenly seems rather complicated, and what looks like several different things are just slight variations on the same thing. On the plus side this means that there is probably a pattern or pace that will suit you best. This is particularly helpful if you've only been shown one way, but that one way didn't feel right for you.*

The effect of breathing like this is very powerful. It offers us a way of getting straight to the root of our stress reactions, or anxiety, by calming down the automatic parts of the brain that switch on fight and flight. It means we can "dial down" the stress reactions directly. When we do this we often then find we are better able to think, react and decide what to do next.

### **More than one way at once**

This kind of breathing shows up in many different activities like

yoga, tai chi, mindfulness and meditation, and even in the way that some people smoke cigarettes!

Leaving the cigarettes aside for a moment, we can see that one activity can tick many boxes. For example tai chi and yoga give you gentle exercise, mindful attention, and calming breath, and you may enjoy meeting other people in a class.