

Introduction to learning to relax

Why does tension matter?

Being in pain may make you feel tense and uptight. The effect of pain on your life may also be causing you stress and frustration. Tension can be felt in the body and it can also affect your emotional wellbeing. Everyone will have their own pattern of tension and stress. Here are some ways that it may affect you.

'Hot spots' for muscle tension	Feelings when tense or stressed	What you do when stressed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ shoulders, ➤ neck, ➤ jaw clenching (teeth grinding) ➤ pelvis, ➤ buttocks, ➤ fist clenching ➤ thighs and calves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ irritable ➤ uptight ➤ on edge ➤ short fused ➤ snappy ➤ difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ snap at others ➤ withdraw ➤ can't sit still

Feeling tense and stressed can be unpleasant in itself, but it can also have unhelpful knock on effects:

- Causing additional problems like headaches
- Causing muscle soreness (e.g. in the neck and shoulders)
- Making other conditions worse e.g. migraines and Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS).
- It is harder to sleep well when you are tense .
- Being tense can often make it harder to cope with pain and tends to make the whole experience of pain worse. Have a look at The Mind-Body Link and Understanding Pain if you want to learn more about this.

Have a think about what your signs of stress and tension are. In particular, learn to notice what your 'early warning' signs are. This gives you the chance to start managing your stress differently.

	My signs of stress and tension
	Really wound up.....
	Starting to get wound up....
	Relaxed

The importance of relaxing

Learning to relax is about finding ways of letting go of both physical and emotional tension. This can be a really helpful thing to do when you are in pain. It's about helping your whole system to unwind which is the *opposite* of what happens when you are in pain.

Everyday ways of relaxing

There are many ways of relaxing, for example:



Have a think about what helps you relax – This will be different for everyone.

It might be that the first step is just allowing yourself to take time out for yourself. Giving yourself permission to relax as part of a balanced approach to looking after yourself can be important. You may want to think about how to get the support of family and friends in finding ways of taking time to relax. Building up your ability to communicate your needs for relaxation might also be helpful.

On top of the everyday ways of relaxing, learning relaxation skills can also be very useful. This is especially so if pain prevents you from doing the things that would normally relax you.