

# Relaxation and Calming Strategies

## How does relaxation work?

When we feel anxious, we might notice that our breathing gets quicker, our hearts beat faster, and our muscles feel tense. This is called the Fight or Flight response and happens when our bodies think we are in danger.

Relaxation skills work by calming our bodies down when they have gone into Fight or Flight mode.



## Explaining the importance of practicing relaxation

It is easier to practise something if we know why it is important. Try explaining why relaxation techniques might help. E.g. "Learning these skills will help you feel calmer when you are scared or worried". For older or more able children, you could also talk about what happens in their bodies when they feel anxious.

## When to practice



Relaxation is something we need to learn. This means it takes practice, just like reading, riding a bike or playing a musical instrument.

Try to encourage your child to practise for a few minutes every day. Start by practising when your child is calm (when we are anxious it is hard to think clearly. This makes it hard to try new things, even if they might help!).

When your child has learned what to do, encourage them to use relaxation techniques when they are feeling anxious. Eventually your child might start noticing when they are feeling anxious and use relaxation techniques independently. However, it may take a while before this happens.

# Relaxation and Calming Strategies

## How to practice relaxation skills

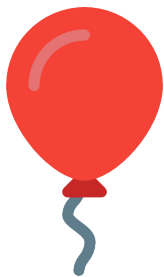
- 1** Find a comfortable place. You can practise relaxation sitting or lying down.
- 2** Start off with short sessions and gradually build up over time.
- 3** Practise with your child. They can also watch and follow what you do.
- 4** Try to use visual resources when teaching relaxation skills whenever possible. For example, you might have cards with pictures showing a skill, or use a non-verbal cue such as holding up five fingers.
- 5** To support generalisation, discuss when and how to use skills in different situations. It can be helpful if other people who care for the child are aware that they are learning relaxation skills too.

# Breathing for relaxation

All children are individuals and may not like all of the relaxation skills described below or find them all helpful. Try different skills until you find one they like and that works for them.

## **Calm breathing**

When we become anxious our breathing becomes fast and shallow. To help with this, we can learn to take slower, deeper breaths from the stomach.



## **Balloon breathing**

Ask your child to put their hands on their tummy. When they breathe in, ask them to imagine their tummy is like a balloon being blown up. When they breathe out, they can imagine their tummy is like a balloon deflating. You should be able to see their hands moving in and out.

## **Five finger breathing**

Ask your child to put their hand flat on the table. Starting at the base of the thumb, ask them to breathe in time to you moving one of your fingers along the side of their thumb, and then to breathe out as you move your finger down the opposite side of their thumb. Continue this for the remaining fingers. When your child is able to do this, they can move on to tracing their own fingers whilst breathing in and out.



## **Windmills**

Encourage your child to breathe in deeply through their noses and then breathe out slowly through their mouths, making the windmill turn round.

## Strategies for relaxing the body

Muscles become tense when we feel anxious. Quite often we do not realise this is happening. Tensing and relaxing muscle groups can help the body calm down. This is called Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

It can be helpful to use a video or audio recording to start with so you and your child can become familiar with the sequence. Alternatively, you may wish to read the script out

### *Script for an older child*

Take a few moments to get comfortable. Take some long, slow breaths to begin.

Start by focusing on the muscles of your head and face. Wrinkle your forehead, squeeze your eyes shut tight and clench your jaw. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles to relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your face.

Now focus on the muscles of your shoulders and neck. Shrug your shoulders up to wards your ears and bring your head down to put your chin on your chest. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your shoulders and neck.

Now focus on your arms and hands. Hold your arms out in front of you and clench your fists tight. Hold that as you count to 10, then let all of those muscles relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your arms and hands.

Now focus on your back. Stand up as straight and tall as you can. Feel yourself getting taller. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your back relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your back.

Now focus on your stomach. Suck your stomach in as tight as you can. Try to pull your belly button towards your back. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your stomach relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your stomach.

Now focus on the muscles in your legs. Try to make your legs as straight and stiff as you can. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your legs relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your legs.

Now focus on your feet. Try to scrunch your toes together as tight as you can. Hold that as you count to 10, then let your feet relax. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your feet.

Now that you have tensed and relaxed all of your muscles, focus on how the most relaxed areas of your body feel now. Take some long, slow breaths to finish.

# Strategies for relaxing the body

## *Script for a younger child*

### ***Hands and Arms - Squeeze a Lemon***

Pretend you have a whole lemon in each hand. Now squeeze it hard. Try to squeeze all the juice out! Feel the tightness in your hand and arm as you squeeze. Squeeze hard! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Now relax and let the lemons drop from your hands.



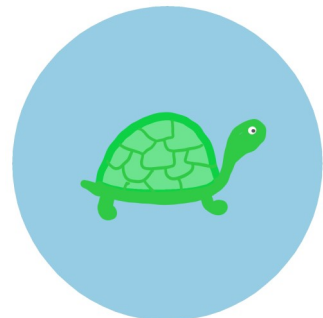
### ***Arms and Shoulders - Stretch Like a Cat***

Pretend you are a cat and you just woke up from a nap. Stretch your arms out in front of you. Now raise them way up high over your head. Feel the pull in your shoulders. Stretch higher and try to touch the ceiling. (Hold for 5 seconds.) Great! Let your arms drop.



### ***Shoulders and Neck - Be a Turtle***

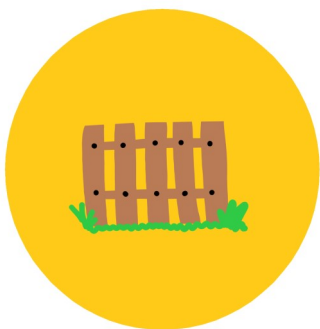
Now pretend you are a turtle. Try to pull your head into your shell. Try to pull your shoulders up to your ears and push your head down into your shoulders. Hold it tight! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Okay, you can come out now. Feel your shoulders relax.



### ***Back - Stand up straight like a soldier***

Pretend to be a soldier. Stand up as straight and tall as you can. Taller! Taller! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Great. Now relax.

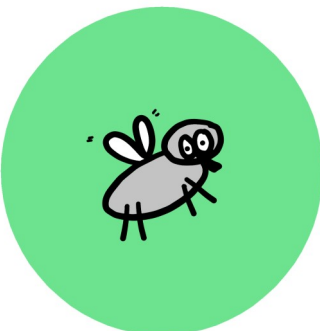


***Stomach: Squeeze through a fence***

Now pretend that you want to squeeze through a narrow fence. Suck your stomach in, try to squeeze it against your backbone. (Hold it for 5 seconds). Great! Now relax.

***Jaw—Chew a carrot***

Now, pretend that you are trying to eat a big, hard carrot. It is very hard to chew. Bite down on it as hard as you can by clenching your teeth together. (Hold for 5 seconds). Good. Now relax.

***Face and Nose - Get a fly off your nose***

Pretend that a fly has landed on your nose! Try to get it off without using your hands. Scrunch up your nose really hard and hold it just as tight as you can. Hold it! (Hold for 5 seconds.) Good. It's gone! Now relax.

***Legs and Feet - Squish your toes in the sand***

Now pretend that you are standing barefoot on the beach. Spread your toes and squish them down deep into the sand. (Hold for 5 seconds.) Relax your feet and your toes.

Now you know how to squeeze away the tightness in your body. Whenever you feel anxious, try to take a few minutes to squeeze and relax your muscles.

## Mindfulness ideas

We know ourselves that our minds can get carried away thinking about all the things we have to do each day, worrying about what might happen in the future, or regretting things we did or did not do in the past. Children can be just the same.

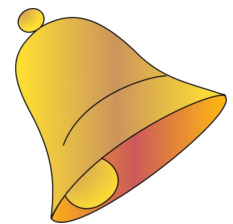
Mindfulness is about focusing on the present instead of on the past or future. It means paying full attention to what is happening inside you (thoughts, feelings and body sensations) and around you, and what you are doing now.

Like other relaxation skills, mindfulness takes practice.

Below are some examples for introducing mindfulness:

### ***Listen to the bell***

An easy way for children to practice mindfulness is to focus their attention on what they can hear. Use a bell, a gong, a singing bowl, or a phone app that plays sounds. Ask your child to listen carefully whilst you make a sound, and to tell you when they think the sound has stopped.



### ***Practice mindful eating***

Use a raisin, a slice of apple or a piece of chocolate to encourage your child to practice eating mindfully by using the following prompts:

First, look at the food. Notice its shape, size, and colour.

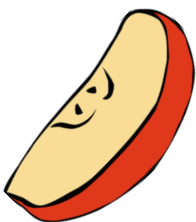
Notice the smell of the food.

Notice how the food feels in your hand, its texture and temperature.

Hold the food in your mouth and notice its texture and flavour on your tongue and in your mouth.

Notice how the food tastes when you bite into it and whether the flavour changes as you are chewing.

Feel the food going down as you swallow.



## Mindfulness ideas

### Five things

Ask your child to look around and name **five** things they can see.

Next ask them to name **four** things they can touch or feel. For example, their clothing or the breeze on their skin.

Next ask them to name **three** things they can hear. This might be a clock ticking, traffic outside, or birds singing.

Next ask your child to name **two** things they can smell. There may not be any smells they are aware of.

Finally, ask them to take **one** long slow breath in and out.

