

# Relaxation Strategies for Insomnia



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# INTRODUCTION

Learning how to relax and feel comfortable on a regular basis is an important part of learning how to sleep better. People often teach themselves how not to sleep through their responses to different conditions and circumstances. It is not a conscious decision, but it can evolve quite quickly or slowly over time. This pamphlet contains strategies you can use to help you relax and sleep better.

## USEFUL HINTS

1. Your first step to relaxation and sleeping better is learning to be aware of how you respond to closing your eyes; your thoughts about sleep such as worrying whether you will sleep and how that affects your life.
2. You could find somewhere quiet to lie down and have some time out. What may be more practical, though, is playing around with some of the following techniques while travelling to work on a bus or train or during a break period.
3. Start by practising these strategies during the daytime.
4. Only do the relaxation exercises/strategies that you like. No one strategy will work for everyone or every time. Most of us like variety with most things. We don't like to eat the same food or wear the same clothes all the time, so why would the same relaxation technique work all the time.
5. Be open to trying new things.
6. Holding your stomach muscles in tightly while continuing to breath normally can have a huge impact on how you perceive things around you. It has the potential to help you focus inwardly, allowing the things around you to retreat into the background.

Just try it and the following strategies.



# SOME RELAXATION STRATEGIES

Before you begin:

- Sit in a straight-backed chair
- Place your feet flat on the floor
- Make yourself comfortable
- Take 2-3 slow deep breaths

## 1. DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

- This way of breathing reverses the way you have breathed for most of your life.
- Place your hands on the abdominal muscles under your navel.
- As you gently breathe in, push your abdominal muscles out so that they push against your hand.
- Hold that breath and slowly count to three seconds.
- As you let your breath go, pull your abdominal muscles in tightly.
- Practise during the day until you learn not to think as you breathe in this way. It can be a very pleasant way of having “time out” which is a great distraction.

## 2. WARM FLUID VISUALISATION

- Close your eyes and breathe normally.
- Imagine there is a warm safe fluid that is being released from the top of your head and is slowly moving down through your body.
- As it moves slowly and steadily down, the excess muscle tension and stress may start to ease.
- Your body may feel more comfortable and safe.
- The fluid eventually passes out through your toes leaving you deeply relaxed.

## 3. COLOURED SHAPE VISUALISATION

- With your eyes closed, imagine a circle or shape on the bridge of your nose.
- Breathe normally and imagine you can make that shape any colour you choose.
- Allow yourself to become quite absorbed in that colour or shape.
- As you become more and more focused, you are less aware of any environmental sounds.
- You are able to feel more comfortable and enjoy a pleasant, heavy feeling in your body. Your breathing is gentle and easy. Enjoy.

## 4. ONE-MINUTE RELAXATION

- Let your eyes gently close.
- Take a deep breath and hold it for as long as you can.
- When you can't hold your breath any longer, let it all out and breathe normally (slow and steady).

- As you do this, focus on keeping your fingers loose, your shoulders drooping or heavy, your jaw loose and your teeth slightly apart.

From: Morawetz, D (1994) Sleep Better Without Drugs published by David Morawetz

## 5. SLOW BREATHING

- Hold your breath, not a deep breath but for the count of 6-8 seconds (e.g. one and two and so on).
- When you reach 6-8 seconds, breathe out and say a word you like to repeat (e.g. calm, peace, quiet, space, warmth, coolness) in a calm, soothing way.
- Continue breathing in this way until you feel calm and in control.

Modified from: G Andrews, R Crino, C Hunt, L Lampe, A Page (1994) The Treatment of Anxiety Disorders Clinician's Guide and Patient Manual, 1994, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

## 6. HILL VISUALISATION

- Imagine yourself standing on the top of a hill, enjoying the warm sun and gentle breeze.
- From this hill you notice there is a flight of 10 steps leading into a quiet peaceful valley below.
- Go down these steps one at a time and focus on your breathing.
- As you go down further, link each downward step with an outward breath.
- With each step you can allow yourself to feel more and more comfortable.
- With each step it becomes easier and easier to let go.

## 7. CONTROLLED BREATHING

- Hold your breath for the count of 5-8 seconds.
- Breathe out slowly in a relaxing way.
- Breathe in to the count of 3 seconds.
- Do this breathing cycle 6 times.
- Start again and continue until you feel more relaxed and comfortable.

## 8. AUTOGENIC TRAINING (SELF-GENERATED TRAINING)

- This involves repeating the same phrases over and over whilst concentrating on feelings of heaviness and warmth.
- Start by thinking "my thumbs are warm and heavy, bathed in light and they feel very comfortable".
- Repeat the phrase a number of times and repeat with each finger.
- Then think of other areas of your body and repeat the process.
- Finally, after concentrating separately on all the different parts of your body: "My whole body feels warm, heavy and comfortable allowing my mind to feel free to drift".

## 9. ENERGY AND SLEEP TECHNIQUE

- This technique, based on hypnosis, is not for everyone.
- Close your eyes and think “It takes tremendous energy to stay awake at night. What could you do with all that energy? You could save energy every night by just letting go and falling asleep”.
- What special project could you undertake that you have not had the energy to deal with for a very long time?
- Learning to direct that energy elsewhere, away from keeping yourself awake at night into something else sounds rather good.
- Learning to rest to replenish your energy at night.
- All you have to do is sleep.

Modified from the suggestions of Milton Erickson Handbook of Hypnotic Suggestions and Metaphors, DC Hammond (ed) WW Norton & Co, New York. Copyright@Delwyn Bartlett MAPS, Registered Psychology (NSW PS0040050)

## USEFUL STRATEGIES TO SLEEP AGAIN

Learning how to focus inwardly and let go of your immediate surroundings is a really useful strategy that can be used for your whole life. It not only applies to learning how to sleep again but gives you the opportunity to have time out at any stage you choose. Making yourself comfortable with a chair or lying on the floor and closing your eyes again brings on the presence of alpha waves. Begin by just focusing on your breathing. Let your breathing become very gentle, very regular and totally under control.

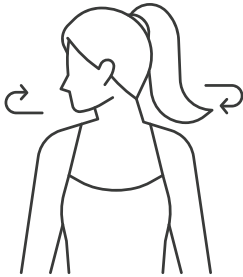
You might like to try doing some specific exercises of progressively relaxing, of “letting go” or learning to let go.



## STRETCHING EXERCISES

With your eyes tightly closed, raise your eyebrows. Stretch the muscles in your forehead and around your eyes – feel this stretch. Sometimes it seems quite difficult to keep your eyes closed when you are doing this exercise. Hold the stretch and enjoy the feeling of stretching the muscles in this part of your face. Now let go. Feel the difference – even if it is only a small difference, be aware of the difference.

Open your mouth just slightly and move your jaw to the left-hand side. Again, feel the stretch – it is a gentle stretch. Bring your jaw slowly back into alignment, then move your jaw to the right-hand side. Relax.



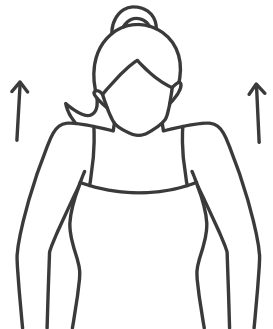
Move your chin gently and slowly and almost in a curve over to your left shoulder. Really stretch your neck muscles. Keep the stretch going, then gently bring your chin back to its usual central position.

Repeat the exercise, but this time slowly and gently take your chin over to your right shoulder – again, enjoy the stretch and again slowly and gently bring your chin back to its usual position.

Slowly stretch your neck directly back, stretch it and hold the stretch. When you come out of this stretching position, come up very slowly as it is possible to feel a little dizzy if you do this too quickly. You may be aware that your neck muscles feel pleasantly stretched.

Now concentrate on the muscles in your shoulders. Keeping your shoulders in their usual position, push them down quite hard. Feel the stretch into your back across your shoulder blades and into your back, across your shoulder blades and down your back.

If you are doing this correctly, you should be able to feel the muscles across your chest and the muscles in your neck. Hold the stretch again and then release it. If you feel like moving your shoulders up and down, then this is the response that reinforces how good your technique is with this exercise.



Now try something similar to what you were doing. Again press your shoulders down but instead of feeling the stretch in your back you may wish to concentrate on the muscles in the backs of your arms.

Extend that stretch further down your arms to your hands and then stretch your fingers out wide as though you are holding something between each finger. Really stretch all these muscles. Let go – feel the difference.

In this next exercise, you will be doing both a simple and complex technique. Concentrate on your breathing. Your breathing is gentle and regular, neither deep nor shallow but steady and comfortable. Now pull your abdominal muscles in tightly whilst keeping your breathing in that gentle, steady rhythm.

See if you can keep your abdominal muscles pulled in tightly for at least 2-3 minutes. Just relax now, let go of that tight muscle control and be aware of the difference.

You may wish to do a similar exercise this time with your perineal muscles and buttocks. Again, pull these muscles up tightly but all the time concentrating on your breathing.

Your breathing is the main focus and the tightening of those muscles is something that you are also doing. Then relax and you may now be aware that the upper half of your body feels a little different from the lower half of your body.

Thinking about the lower half of your body, you may now wish to do an exercise that stretches most of the muscles in your legs and feet. Cross your ankles and then gently and steadily lift your feet off the ground.

If you point your toes down towards the ground at the same time, you will be aware of the stretch in your feet, in the arches of your feet, in your ankles, your knees and in the quad muscles in the upper part of your legs.



Keep the stretch going for 1-2 minutes. Now just let go and place your feet gently back on the ground and feel the difference. There may also be a sense of releasing the muscle tension.

Keep your eyes closed – enjoy even the small changes in muscle tension. Concentrate on your even, gentle, regular breathing, feeling each breath as it goes in and then out again. Lose yourself to the pattern of your breathing and, as you find yourself drawing in on a breath entering and leaving your body, you will find that the thoughts in your head slowly begin to disappear.

Knowing that the ability to relax is still there and knowing that you have the key to unlocking that gate or opening up that pathway is very reassuring – you know that you know how to sleep. It is within you to let go and relax on a more regular basis.

Letting go – where you can look forward to sleep. Looking forward to sleep means that you can safely say goodbye to the day. You can move down slowly and more slowly into yourself, your subconscious self. Just go with the feeling of drifting, drifting along. Letting go a little more and a little more with each gentle breath. There is no right or wrong way to feel relaxed but you may just feel it becomes easier and easier to let go.



## ANOTHER EXERCISE FOR RELEARNING SLEEP

For this exercise, you may like to pull your stomach muscles in again tightly to help you focus a little bit more inwardly. Hold them in like we did in the other exercises but the main focus for you now is on your breathing; the rise and fall of your chest. It is easy and comfortable.

With your eyes closed, your eyelids are protecting your eyes. They are keeping out most of the light in your room, watering your eyes so they don't get dry and protecting them from dust. Sometimes it is useful to think of yourself as having a mind's eye and your mind's eye having a mind's eyelid. Your mind's eyelid may be able to be closed, protecting you when you choose. That protection may come in the form of not allowing all sorts of daytime thoughts, worries, concerns or even "just stuff" from coming in and taking over your mind and keeping you awake.

Your mind's eyelid can take any form that makes sense for you. It may be more relevant for you to think of it as a door or a filing cabinet drawer that you can close. It could be a curtain that you can pull across and it can be any shade, any texture - soft like velvet or with a hard, firm feeling like heavy linen. It can be anything that makes sense for you.

Sometimes thinking of water can be useful – water that allows you to float but supports you, that is warm and comfortable. Or maybe even just space. Space may protect you from thoughts, from worries, from concerns or from junk in your mind that doesn't really make sense.

As you develop a sense of moving away, moving down, you may like to let go of those pulled-in stomach muscles. You may now feel a warm sensation which is probably the blood supply returning to those muscles, but you may like to think of it as warm energy. This energy is a different sort of energy that allows you to feel just a little bit more relaxed and that energy, that releasing energy, helps to make your body feel heavy.

This is a nice heaviness. The heavier your body starts to feel, the lighter your mind may feel and it is no longer tied down by anything specific. You may have a sense of drifting, of letting go and letting go can become a very easy thing to do. The more you practise it, the more confident you may feel, and the easier it becomes. This is something very special that you can do. Just you. It doesn't concern anybody else. Just you. That is a very reassuring thing to know – you can let go more easily now. And letting go may allow you to drift further and further away.

You may feel warm. You may feel cool. You may be aware of colours - colours that helps you feel deeply relaxed. It may be a sensation of the sun on your skin – not too hot, not too cold. Just comfortable and the more comfortable you feel, the



more likely you are to let go just a little more. To let go of where you are. To be less aware of where you are. Feeling more and more comfortable with yourself. Nothing specific.

Just you.

As you move along further on your particular pathway it may be useful for you to remind yourself that we all know how to sleep. We all know how to sleep but somewhere that message can get a little lost. Those pathways can become overgrown through thinking negatively about sleep and losing your confidence about sleeping.

Knowing that you know how to sleep and knowing that your ability is still there and knowing that you have the key to unlocking the gate or opening up that pathway is very reassuring – somewhere you do know you know how to sleep. It is within you to learn to let go on a more regular basis. Looking forward to sleep. Looking forward to the night. Letting go of the day. Moving down easily and slowly ...

Extracted from “Relearning Sleep” CD  
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## ADDITIONAL MUSCLE DE-STRESSING STRATEGIES

Calming Strategies from “Instant Calm” by Paul Wilson

### HAND EXERCISES

If you experience some anxious feelings when you think about your sleep, you may like to try these acupuncture pressure point exercises.

- You have an acupressure point in the centre of your wrist, two thumb lengths from the bottom of your palm.
- You can press on that point with the thumb of your other hand and release after around 20 seconds. Try concentrating on this pressure point. You may start to feel less concerned about your sleep and start to feel more comfortable. OR
- You could massage on the same pressure point using forward strokes with your thumb or fingers in a counterclockwise direction. You could repeat this exercise up to 100 times.

## JAW PRESSURE EXERCISES

- Find the muscle which runs from your jaw to the level of the middle of your ear lobe.
- Using just the tips of your index fingers, place them on this muscle and apply some pressure until you feel a light pain.
- Hold the pressure for 5-10 seconds and then slowly release the pressure.
- Repeat up to 10 times.

## HAND EXERCISE OR FRONT AND BACK PRESS

- This acupressure point helps to reduce tension around the head and neck areas.
- Put one hand at the back of your neck just below your skull whilst your other hand is on your forehead.
- If you are right-handed then use your right hand behind your neck. If you are left-handed then you use your left hand.
- Apply some pressure but more from a perspective of balancing and lifting your head and neck so that your neck muscles do not have to exert as much effort as normal.
- When you feel this effect, let your arms relax.
- You could then do some slow deep breathing or use the diaphragmatic breathing technique listed below.

## DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

We started this booklet with diaphragmatic breathing and repeating it combined with a visualisation component may be useful.

- Imagine a small “b” or lower case “b” as you do this exercise.
- Keep that “b” in your mind all the time.
- Place your hands on your lower abdominal muscles below your belly button.
- As you breathe in, push your stomach muscles out. Imagine your stomach is the rounded part of the “b”.
- Hold that breath and then take it up to your shoulders but still with your stomach muscles pushed out.
- As you breathe out, slide the breath down your spine (like the flat or back part of the letter “b”).
- Let go of the breath.
- Enjoy – you do not need to think of anything other than the letter “b” and the breath.
- Repeat.





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