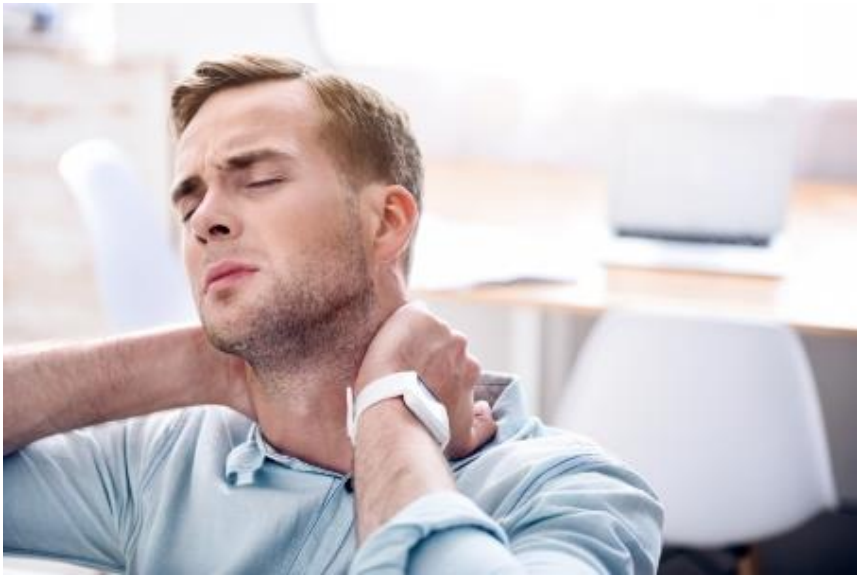
Relaxation techniques

Āhua whakatā



Many situations can cause us to feel uptight and tense. There may be specific stresses such as family or work problems. You may have other issues such as anxiety or depression.

These can all cause your muscles to tense and your breathing to become faster and shallower.

Muscle tension can cause muscle aches and leave some people feeling exhausted.

Breathing problems can make you feel frightened, light-headed and dizzy. Learning to regain control of your breathing gives you a simple tool to calm yourself and relax when you feel panicky.

Muscle tension

Muscle tension is commonly associated with stress, anxiety and fear as part of a process that helps our bodies prepare for potentially dangerous situations. Even though some of those situations may not actually be dangerous, our bodies respond in the same way. Sometimes we don't even notice how our muscles become tense. Progressive muscle relaxation helps us learn to relax our muscles (see *Progressive muscle relaxation* on www.healthinfo.org.nz).

Fast breathing

We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. To run efficiently, our bodies need a balance between oxygen and carbon dioxide. We maintain this balance through how fast and how deeply we breathe.

When we're anxious, we take in more air than our body needs – we over-breathe, or hyperventilate (see *Hyperventilation* on www.healthinfo.org.nz). The body responds with chemical changes that produce symptoms such as dizziness, light-headedness, confusion, breathlessness, blurred vision, increased heart rate, numbness and tingling in our hands and feet, cold clammy hands and muscle stiffness. We can use a calming breathing technique to overcome this (see *Calming breathing techniques* on www.healthinfo.org.nz).

Many people who over-breathe don't realise that they're doing so. You may not realise that frequent sighing, yawning or audible intakes of air before speech are all signs that you're over-breathing. You can do a simple questionnaire on http://www.buteykokent.co.uk/images/The%20Nijmegen%20Questionnaire.pdf to test how much you're over-breathing. If your score is high, you're likely to benefit from help with improving your breathing techniques.

Other helpful information

Meditation

Meditation can help some people to relax.

- On the University of Auckland's CALM website you'll find some audio relaxation and meditation files, which can help you relax using various techniques. See https://www.calm.auckland.ac.nz/20.html.
- Smiling Mind (www.smilingmind.com.au) is a free mindfulness meditation available as a web-based program or an app.

Meditation groups

- Meetup (www.meetup.com/topics/meditation/nz/christchurch) lists meditation groups that you can join to learn about meditation and meet people in your local community who share your interests.

Physiotherapy

Learning how to breathe and relax properly can be very helpful. Some physiotherapists have special skills in relaxation and breathing. Check with your physiotherapist if they do.

Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed October 2020. Updated November 2020