

A large, solid yellow circle is positioned on the left side of the page, overlapping the background image. It contains the title and subtitle text in blue and black. The background image is a photograph of a beach with waves breaking on the shore under a clear sky.

A guide to relaxation

For people wishing to introduce relaxation into their lives.

Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20
www.cancerqld.org.au

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If you would like to know more about the information and support services provided by Cancer Council Queensland, call our Helpline on 13 11 20 Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.

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A guide to relaxation



This booklet is for people wishing to introduce relaxation into their lives. It is designed as a guide to be used with your ‘Learning to relax’ CD. The CD is available by contacting Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20, Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm. In this booklet you will find information about relaxation exercises, as well as other types of relaxing activities.

Suggestions are made for how to get the most from your relaxation practice and tips are given for overcoming obstacles to relaxation. Most of the suggestions in this booklet come from talking with people who have been diagnosed with cancer and their friends and family. Many people said learning ways to manage stress, such as practising relaxation, was very important in helping them to cope well with their cancer experiences. Relaxation skills can also be helpful for managing other stressful situations in life, such as work stress.



What is the fight or flight response?

Most people say they are 'stressed' when they feel overwhelmed or upset by the demands of a situation.

Not all people react to stress or experience it in the same way. However, there are some stress reactions that are common when people are faced with a stressful situation. These reactions come from something called the 'fight or flight' response. The 'fight or flight' response is a reaction to stress. It is part of the human body's normal reaction to things we see as threatening, or requiring extra effort. The 'fight or flight' stress response prepares a person to cope.

When a person is faced with a threatening situation, the body releases a substance called adrenaline into their bloodstream. This adrenaline prepares their body for physical action against a threat or challenge. It stimulates their heart and increases the circulation of blood to muscles, air passages are relaxed and breathing is stimulated, and digestion is slowed. All of these reactions help the person to be better at fighting a challenge, or running away from it. This is why the stress response is often called the 'fight or flight' response.

Many of the physical reactions people experience when first faced with a stressful situation are due to this 'fight or flight' response. The extra amounts of adrenaline in their body produce reactions such as rapid breathing, muscle tension and a racing heart. With time, these responses settle down and become less intense. However, there are some situations where stress reactions may persist and a person feels the stress they experience is ongoing.



Some common situations that can lead to ongoing stress are:

- Ill health in either yourself or someone close to you.
- Unemployment.
- Starting a new job or career.
- Buying or selling a house.
- Caring for an elderly relative.
- Planning retirement, or a major lifestyle change.
- Changes in relationships, such as divorce or marriage.
- Becoming a new parent.
- Travel or holiday times, such as Christmas.

Even pleasant occasions can be demanding or stressful. Stressful situations can be anything a person finds challenging in some way.

Some people's reactions to stress are very physical. Common physical 'fight or flight' reactions to stress include:

- Muscle tension, stiff back or shoulders or general aches and pains.
- Headaches.
- Clenched teeth, tight jaw muscles or grinding teeth.
- Rapid breathing or breathlessness.
- Changes to sleep such as light, disturbed sleep, difficulty falling asleep, sleeping more or difficulty getting up in the morning.
- Changes to eating patterns such as loss of appetite, eating more than usual or eating comfort foods such as chocolate.
- Racing heart or palpitations.
- Sweaty palms.
- Twitches or shakes.
- Feeling faint.
- Feeling exhausted.
- Stomach upsets, indigestion or nausea.

People's stress responses are individual, we don't all find the same things in life challenging or stressful. However, many people say being diagnosed with cancer, or finding out someone they are close to has cancer, is a stressful time. Finding ways to manage increased stress is a useful skill that helps people cope with diagnosis, cancer treatments, illness and recovery.

- People's stress responses are individual.
- Reactions to stress are called the 'fight or flight' response.
- The 'fight or flight' response prepares a person to cope.
- Relaxation is one way to help manage stress.

Introducing relaxation into your life

The stress response is normal and is not something you can get rid of, however prolonged stress can become unpleasant and difficult to manage.

The 'fight or flight' response serves an important purpose in preparing us for new situations. However, it can be unpleasant if you feel over-stressed. The main aim of relaxation practice is to help keep stress reactions at levels where you feel in control.

In our daily routine we often undertake relaxing activities such as hobbies or sport. These activities help us manage stress in our lives. However, during treatments and recovery, some of these activities may be interrupted. Family members and friends who support people through treatments often find they are busier than usual. Some of their activities or hobbies may be put on hold for a while.

Relaxation exercises can be useful for reducing stress when your normal relaxing activities aren't working or have to be put on hold.

Learning to relax involves becoming aware of your own stress reactions, and knowing when you need to take time out to reduce your tension. Sometimes when people feel stressed they find it hard to break the cycle of tension or anxiety. Relaxation exercises enable a person to stop, slow things down and focus on reducing their feelings of stress. Relaxation is not simply recreation, rest or leisure time. It is also not daydreaming or letting your mind wander. Relaxation exercises are skills people learn. Relaxation involves deliberately and consciously focusing on relaxing your mind and body. To get the most from relaxation exercises you need to practice them regularly, just like any other skill.

Choosing a relaxation exercise

Choosing a relaxation exercise that is right for you is important. If you enjoy doing your relaxation exercises, it is more likely you will fit your practice sessions into your normal routines. Relaxation exercises should be pleasant and relaxing, not a chore or burden.

Listen to Cancer Council Queensland's relaxation CD to get ideas about what type of relaxation might be right for you. Different people find different exercises relaxing. Some people like using their imagination, other people like to focus on physical relaxation. Also, work or family commitments mean some exercises may be easier than others to schedule into weekly routines. Choose one that suits your lifestyle and personality. Experiment with the exercises on the CD until you find the right one for you.

Learning to relax involves becoming aware of your own stress reactions and knowing when you need to take time out to reduce your tension.

Pick a time to practice your relaxation

Think about when you will practice and make a regular practice time.

Pick a time when you are unlikely to be interrupted or feel rushed. You may need to experiment with the time of day when you practice. Some people find they are busy early in the morning and more likely to be interrupted. For other people, early morning is their favourite time of the day. They find time in the mornings for their quiet time, and feel it is the best time for relaxation practice.

Pick a place to practice your relaxation

Think about where you will practice. Pick a place that is quiet and distraction-free. This helps you to concentrate. Some people like to pick the favourite room of their house and other people have a special spot in their garden where they like to practice. Some people always use the same place whenever they practice their relaxation, where as other people find they like a change of setting and do not have a special relaxation place.

Practice where you feel comfortable. You do not have to lie down to practice relaxation, a comfortable chair will do. Closing your eyes when practising relaxation helps to reduce distractions. However, some people find they are able to practice with their eyes open.

Some people also learn to relax while standing, or when they are in places that are less quiet.

Practice regularly

Relaxation exercises are a skill. The more you practice, the better you will get. Most people find that practising for about 20 minutes, at least three times a week, gives them the most benefit from their practice sessions. Aim for relaxation practice sessions to become a daily habit or routine.

Practice relaxation even when you feel relaxed and calm, so your relaxation becomes a skill you can use whenever you want to. When you have less time, try the quick relaxation exercise on page 17, or one of the short exercises on your relaxation CD. They take about five minutes to do.

Relaxation exercises are a skill. The more you practice, the better you will get.

Relaxation exercise during illness, cancer treatments and recovery

People often find their daily routines are interrupted while they recover from surgery, or during other cancer treatments. During these times some people feel bored or restless. Others have stiff muscles, or feel sore or tender following treatment. Regular practice of relaxation exercises can be especially helpful during this time, and may relieve physical discomfort, tension and stress.

Sometimes, exercises that involve muscle relaxation may need to be modified or changed. Treatments such as surgery, radiation therapy or chemotherapy may cause tenderness or soreness in parts of the body being treated. It is important to be careful when doing relaxation exercises involving tensing and releasing muscles. Do not over-stretch or over-extend limbs, muscles or other parts of the body that ache or are tender. If you feel pain while doing muscle relaxation exercises, gently release tension to the area. Don't over do it, and never hold, tighten or stretch a part of your body if it hurts. Try a relaxation exercise that involves mental imagery instead.

If you feel pain while doing muscle relaxation exercises, gently release tension to the area.

Getting the most from your relaxation practice

- **Be aware of falling asleep when you practice.**

You can use relaxation to prepare for sleep. However, falling asleep while doing relaxation means you stop practising your skills. Your relaxation exercises may then become less useful in situations where you need to stay awake, such as waiting for treatment.

- **Don't let your relaxation practice time be taken over by other things.**

Some people find life becomes busy and other things start to intrude upon their relaxation practice times. Often, other activities and demands take over and, when they are not kept in balance with our lives, can increase our stress levels. Making sure there is still some time for relaxation helps to manage stress levels. If you find your practice time has been reduced or stopped by other commitments, try changing around your practice times.

- **Pick the right time of day for you.**

Most people find it difficult to practice when they first come home from a busy day. They may have meals to prepare, pets to feed or feel tired. Don't try to practice relaxation when you first arrive home. Allow yourself some time to wind down before starting a practice session. If you know there are some things you need to do, get them done first so your mind is not busy thinking about other things that you need to do.

- **Be patient with yourself.**

Don't criticise your performance while practising. Don't worry if your mind wanders and you become distracted. Take it easy and be patient with yourself. During times of increased stress it can be difficult to focus your mind and concentrate. This is normal and okay. It does not mean you are not good at relaxation exercises. If you are distracted during practice, gently remind yourself to refocus. This is what practising is all about. Remember, the more you practice, the easier it becomes.



- **If you become bored, experiment with other types of relaxation.**

Sometimes people become bored with their relaxation exercise. When this happens they may no longer find their practice sessions rewarding. Also, their relaxation exercise may not be as effective in reducing their stress levels. It is important to always keep your relaxation exercise enjoyable. They should be something to look forward to. If you have become bored it may be time for a change. Experiment with types of relaxation you find interesting. Don't be afraid to try a new exercise to see how you like it.

It is important to always keep your relaxation exercises enjoyable. They should be something to look forward to. If you have become bored, it may be time for a change.

Other types of relaxation

Some people like to vary the types of relaxation they practice. This helps them to keep enthusiastic about their practice, and gives them new things to look forward to. Some common types of relaxation include Tai Chi, yoga and meditation.

- Tai Chi is a form of gentle exercise that involves using slow graceful movements. It aims to increase strength and improve flexibility, balance and circulation.
- Yoga uses a combination of co-ordinated breathing, concentration and postures to aid mental and physical relaxation.
- Meditation includes a variety of techniques that use mental focus to encourage greater acceptance and a sense of peace. Physical relaxation is often an effect of meditation.

It is also useful to consider introducing more relaxing activities into your daily life. For example, many people find listening to their favourite music a relaxing pastime. Having a massage or taking a bubble bath can help reduce physical tension. Simply sitting quietly and looking at nice scenery helps many people to wind down and relax.

Remember, with all forms of relaxation, take things gently. If you are recovering from cancer treatments be careful not to over-stretch, or hold positions or postures that cause pain. The aim of relaxation sessions are to help you feel calm and tranquil, not sore or uptight.

It is also useful to consider introducing more relaxing activities into your daily life.

Quick relaxation exercise

This relaxation exercise is quick and easy. It takes about five minutes to do and can help you reduce physical symptoms of stress. Practice this exercise when you have less time.

- 1** Stop what you are doing.
- 2** Sit down, or lean against something near you.
- 3** Close eyes, or focus on an object in the room.
- 4** Breathe in deeply and slowly, counting to four. Then breathe out slowly, counting to four.
- 5** Breathe in slowly, counting to four, then hold your breath for two seconds.
- 6** Breathe out slowly, counting to four.
- 7** Breathe in and out slowly, counting to four each time. Do this several more times.
- 8** As you breathe in and out, say to yourself 'relax'.
- 9** Next time you breathe in, begin to imagine you are in your favourite place, relaxing comfortably.
- 10** Hold that image, breathing in the same relaxed, calm way.
- 11** Look around you in your safe place. Tell yourself you can come here whenever you want to. This is your safe place, you can feel relaxed and calm here.
- 12** When you feel more relaxed, open your eyes.
- 13** Allow yourself to start afresh. Plan your next move slowly. Begin your next task whenever you feel ready.

Tips for getting started with relaxation

- Choose a relaxation exercise that suits your lifestyle and personality.
- Choose a quiet place.
- Pick a quiet time to practice relaxation.
- Practice regularly.
- Be patient with yourself.
- Introduce relaxing activities into your daily routine.



For further information,
please feel free to call the

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on 13 11 20,

Monday to Friday,
between 8am and 6pm.



Notes



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