

LEARNING TO RELAX

INTRODUCTION

One of the principle obstacles to ultimate performance is excessive tension, which is often the result of being overly aroused or anxious. Learning to control emotions and arousal level is therefore critical to success in elite level competition.

The first step, and one of the primary skills in tension control is learning to relax. Without this ability it is impossible to perform at your best, because tension interferes with coordination and concentration, two critical elements of performance success.

Relaxation comes easier to some people than others, but it can be learned by anyone. Like any skill, it is a matter of knowing what to do and then practising. There are several relaxation methods available, but each performer must determine which works best for them.

That's what this unit is about. It introduces the three most common relaxation methods, and provides scripts and guidelines to practice each.

UNIT CONTENT	
WHY RELAX?	60
RELAXATION TECHNIQUES	61
PRACTISING RELAXATION	63
RELAXATION DIARY	64
PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE REL.	65
AUTOGENIC RELAXATION	69
CLOCK RELAXATION	73
TEACHING RELAXATION	75

UNIT OBJECTIVE

DURING COMPETITION, APPLY A PREFERRED RELAXATION TECHNIQUE TO ACHIEVE A HIGH STATE OF RELAXATION, WITHIN A MINIMAL TIME FRAME.

SUGGESTED METHODS

- 1. PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION***
- 2. AUTOGENIC RELAXATION***
- 3. CLOCK RELAXATION***

There is no right or wrong way to relax. The methods presented here have proven effective, but the only way to find out what works best for you is to try them all.

It might not be possible to achieve total relaxation immediately because this is a skill that requires practice. The main goal at this point is to learn the method and experience the feeling of being totally relaxed.

HERE'S WHAT TO DO.

1. The idea is to get practising as soon as possible, so read only as much of the unit content as you feel is necessary to get started.
2. Review the "Relaxation Practice Procedure" and apply this in every practice session.
3. Review the "Relaxation Diary" to see how you can keep track of your progress.
4. Try each technique at least once, and complete the Diary after each session.
5. To master the skill, follow the practice schedule in the Coaches Corner.

THE ROLE OF STRESS

COPE WITH STRESS

It is important to understand that competition is, in itself, stressful and performers respond differently to stress situations. Symptoms include headaches vomiting, breathing difficulties or even loss of flexibility. Psychological responses include distortions in perception of events, loss of concentration, reduced decision making ability as well as mood changes.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Most of these stress responses can have serious negative effects on performance. For athletes, breathing problems interfere with timing and the coordination required for fluid movement. Other performers may experience inappropriate attentional focus causing them to miss important cues needed to read and interpret the situation. Perceptual changes can affect how well we see. All these points support the desirability of learning and developing relaxation skills.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

The three relaxation methods commonly used by performers are included in this unit. The important thing is to use whatever system does the job for you, then develop the skill to the point where you can relax, on command, within seconds. That's where the payoff is, controlling the relaxation response as required to improve performance.

Here are the three basic relaxation methods commonly used by athletes and performers.

1. PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

This technique, often referred to as *body to mind relaxation*, is very effective for teaching beginners to associate the relaxation response with their level of muscle tension. It consists of tensing and relaxing various muscles or muscle groups in sequence, while associating the relaxed state with a cue word. Over a period of time, they learn to achieve the relaxed state on command, using only the cue. This is a good place to start for those who have never practised any form of relaxation before.

2. AUTOGENIC RELAXATION

Autogenic simply means spontaneous relaxation, telling yourself to relax by concentrating on relaxing various parts of the body. Very common among athletes, this *mind to body* technique is often associated with visualizing a relaxing place of your choice, i.e. seeing yourself at the beach, walking in the forest, the seashore or anywhere you find particularly relaxing.

3. CLOCK RELAXATION

This relaxation procedure is popular because of its simplicity. The participant simply relates various parts of the body to the numbers on a clock. Then, using autogenic relaxation, concentrates on systematically relaxing the numbered body parts.

This provides a simple, quick and effective means of relaxing selected muscles or groups. Although easy to apply, it requires some basic skill in relaxation first, and should be used as a follow-up to autogenic relaxation.

LEARNING TO RELAX

Once mastered, relaxation can be induced anywhere, under any conditions. But learning to relax requires three basic components, which are;

1. ***A QUIET ENVIRONMENT with REDUCED NOISE AND LIGHT TO PERMIT BETTER CONCENTRATION.***
2. ***A COMFORTABLE POSITION, USUALLY EITHER SITTING OR LYING DOWN, AND A READINESS TO RELAX.***
3. ***A PASSIVE ATTITUDE, TOTALLY NON-JUDGMENTAL, WITH NO CONFLICTING THOUGHTS.***

The written scripts, which are a simple way to get started, are meant to guide the relaxation sessions, These can be revised to suit personal preferences.

Audio tapes are also useful in the learning process, and there is an abundance of these available through sports organization, libraries etc. Some have been identified at the end of the unit, but in fact, many international athletes prefer to make their own tape for personal use.

RELAXATION PRACTICE

PROCEDURE

STEP 1.

Before practising any relaxation exercise, turn to the "Relaxation Diary" . This will help monitor your progress. Using the rating scale on the Diary, rate your level of tension or relaxation at that moment, in the "Before" column.

STEP 2.

Now proceed to the exercise, using one of these three methods.

1. Read the script into a tape recorder, and use that to guide the exercise. Remember to read slowly and in a calm voice, *or*
2. Read the script until it is memorized, then perform the sequence from memory, *or*
3. Have someone else read the script as you relax. After several repetitions, you will be able to perform the sequence on your own.

STEP 3.

At the end of the session, use the "Relaxation Diary" to record your level of tension or relaxation in the "After" column. Use the same rating scale you used in Step 1.

STEP 4.

The goal is to achieve total relaxation in progressively shorter times. Practising every day, it will take about 2 weeks to master the routine.

RELAXATION DIARY

INSTRUCTIONS

Use this form to record details of your relaxation practices. Record your level of relaxation "before" and "after" each session, by assigning a value between 1 and 7, where 1 = totally relaxed and 7 = extremely tense.

A value of 4 would represent a typical level of tension while performing a normal activity such as eating lunch, riding to work or school etc.

Use the columns on the right side to keep track of where you applied the relaxation process. The purpose of this is to work towards being able to relax anywhere, anytime. Make extra copies of this page for additional weeks.

WEEK 1	RATINGS		LOCATIONS		
DAY	BEFORE	AFTER	OFF-SITE	PRACTICE	PERF/SITE
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					

WEEK 2	RATINGS		LOCATIONS		
DAY	BEFORE	AFTER	OFF-SITE	PRACTICE	PERF/SITE
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

INTRODUCTION

The idea behind Progressive Muscle Relaxation, is to develop an awareness of the difference between tense and relaxed muscles.

This is achieved by systematically tensing and relaxing muscles or muscle groups in sequence, and concentrating on those feelings. By associating the relaxation phase with a cue word, such as "*Relax*", or "*Let Go*", or "*Easy*", you will, over a period of time, learn to relax by simply using that cue word.

If you are familiar with relaxation practice procedure, and have the script or tape on hand, you are ready to start. Record your current level of relaxation in the diary now.

SCRIPT FOR PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

NOTE: Each “*” in the text represents a 5 second pause.

INSTRUCTIONS

In this progressive muscle relaxation exercise, you will focus on four areas of your body - the face and neck, the arms, torso, and the legs. You will be contracting and relaxing all the muscles in these areas in turn.

Pick a cue word you would like to use as you relax the muscles.* * Sit or lie down and get as comfortable as you can. If you need to move into a more comfortable position during the exercise, do so. Are you comfortable? * Let's get started.

SCRIPT

Begin by focusing your attention on the muscles in the arms, hands and the fingers. Tense all these muscles by clenching the fists and extending your arms straight out in front of you. Tense every muscle from the fist, up to the shoulder. Tense, tense, tense, feel the tension. Now relax. Let the arms come down. * Feel the warmth, the heaviness, and the relaxation. Repeat your cue word as you let all the tensions leave the upper arms, the forearms, the wrists, the hands and the fingers. Relaxed, warm and heavy. Relaxed, warm and heavy. Note the difference between the tensed muscles and the relaxed muscles. * *

Once again now, tense all the muscles in your upper arms, forearms, hands, fingers. Hard, hard, hard, feel the tension, note the difference between when they are tense and when they were relaxed. * Relax and repeat your cue word. Feel the warmth and the heaviness flow down from your shoulders, from your upper arms, your forearms, wrists, hands and fingers. Relaxed, warm and heavy. Relaxed, warm and heavy.* *

Now, keep your arms relaxed and focus your attention on the muscles of the face and neck. On the signal "now", I want you to tense these muscles. Squint the eyes closed

tight, pull the eyebrows down and in, tighten your lips, clench your teeth together, push your tongue into the roof of the mouth, pull your neck and push your head into the surface behind you. Okay, focusing on the face and neck, tense these muscles, "**now**" - forehead, eyes, jaws, tongue, lips, neck. Hard, hard, hard. Hold the tension and note what that feels like, especially in the forehead and in the jaw muscles. *

Now relax as you repeat your cue word. Feel your forehead relax, your eyebrows move apart, eyes stay lightly closed, your lips part slightly and your tongue moves into the back of your mouth. Move your head from side to side so that it rests comfortably. Feel the relaxation spread from the forehead to the eyes, nose, jaw, tongue, lips and neck. Relaxed, relaxed and calm. The muscles in this part of the body are relaxed and calm. *
*

Now focus on the muscles in your the chest, abdomen, back and shoulders. When asked, tense all these muscles. Pull your shoulders back and up toward your ears, take a deep breath. At the same time tighten the abdominal muscles and push the small of your back into the floor or chair.

Do this **now**. Hard, hard, feel the tension throughout the torso from the shoulders to the hips. * * Now Relax, breathe out passively as you repeat your cue word. Let the shoulders drop and move forward. The abdominal muscles loosen and the arch returns to the small of the back. Breathe easily and deeply into your abdomen. Feel the warmth and heaviness spread throughout your upper body as you relax deeper and deeper. * *

Now focus on the muscles of the hips and legs. When asked, tense all these muscles. Squeeze the buttocks together, tighten the thigh, push your toes away from your head, rotate your toes inward and curl them tight. Do this **now**. * Tense all the muscles in the hips and the legs. Hard, hard, hard. Feel yourself rise up, feel the tension in the calves and the feet. Hold that tension for a few seconds. *

Now relax and repeat your cue word. Feel the warmth and heaviness in the hips and legs. As you relax, your toes will fall slightly outward. The tension is gone in the buttocks and thighs. They are warm and heavy. Calves, ankles, feet and toes are completely relaxed. The whole body is relaxed, warm and heavy. * *

Now concentrate on each section of the body as it is mentioned. Focus your attention on that part and try to make it more relaxed than it is now. Begin with the face, * * relax the neck, * * relax the shoulders, * * relax the arms and hands, * * relax the torso, * * relax the hips * * and finally, relax the legs. * * *

Enjoy this state of relaxation for a few moments. Be aware of the feelings of total relaxation. * * If you feel tension in any part of your body, focus on that part, tense it hard and then relax it while repeating your cue word. * * * *

Now, you can bring yourself back to an alert state as we count backwards from five to one.

Five, feel the energising effect of your blood flowing through your body. You might even feel a tingling in the tips of your fingers and toes. * Four, feel the blood flow through your organs, your heart, your liver, your kidneys, your lungs. Feel the warmth and energy it brings. * Three, feel the energy as your blood delivers oxygen to every muscle in the body. This might cause a twitch here or there in your arms, legs or back. Enjoy that good feeling. It says you are ready for action. * Two, now sense the blood coursing through your brain. It makes you alert, excited, full of energy. * One, wake up now feel completed refreshed from the relaxation session. Record your present level of relaxation in the diary.

AUTOGENIC RELAXATION

INTRODUCTION

Autogenic Relaxation involves simply concentrating on specific parts of the body and willing those muscles to relax. This is quite easy once you know the feeling of relaxed muscles.

If you associate the relaxation with a favourite cue word, such as "Relax", "Let Go", or "Easy", you will eventually be able to relax on command, using just that word.

Monitor your progress by recording your level of relaxation or tension before and after each practice session, using the "Relaxation Diary".

Once you are familiar with the procedure and are prepared with your script or tape, you are ready to start. Record your current level of relaxation in the diary, as directed.

SCRIPT FOR AUTOGENIC RELAXATION

NOTE: Each "*" in the text represents a 5 second pause.

INSTRUCTIONS

In this relaxation exercise, you will focus on various areas of your body and concentrate on relaxing those muscles or muscle groups just by thinking about it. Pick a cue word you would like to use as your relaxation trigger. * * Now take a few seconds to get as comfortable as you can. Let the chair, or area where you are lying, support your body. Move around until you find a position where your muscles do not have to work to hold you. While you are finding that position, loosen any tight clothing. You might want to slip out of your shoes. Allow your eyes to close and relax. * * Are you comfortable? * Let's get started.

SCRIPT

Allow your mouth to open for a moment and move your jaw slowly and easily from side to side. * * Now let your mouth close, keeping your teeth slightly apart. As you do, take a deep breath, * and slowly let the air slip out. * Take another deep breath. * As you breathe out, silently repeat your cue word. Feel yourself floating. As you become more and more comfortable, let yourself relax even further. * *

One more deep breath. * As you breathe out, silently repeat your cue word. * Let the air slip out easily and automatically. You should now be feeling very calm. Continue breathing slowly and deeply. * As you relax more and more your breathing will become deeper and slower. * Your eyes are closing, you are breathing slowly and deeply, * * you are now very relaxed. * *

Focus on your right hand and forearm. Relax the muscles. Feel the lower arm and hand become warm and heavy, warm and heavy. Relaxed, warm and heavy. * Let this feeling flow into your upper arm. The warmth, the heaviness, the relaxation. Slow and effortless breathing. Let your body go, * relax completely. *

Now focus on your left hand and forearm. Feel the same warmth and heaviness as those muscles relax. The hand and forearm are becoming warm and heavy. Relaxed, warm and heavy. * Each breath increases the relaxation as tension dissipates. * The warm relaxed feeling now flows to your left upper arm. Your arms are now very heavy and relaxed. * *

Let this relaxation flow up from both arms across the shoulders and up the neck. * With each breath the relaxation flows further up to the face, * the lips, * the tongue, * the cheeks, * the jaw, * the eyes. * The relaxation continues to flow upward as you relax the eyebrows, * forehead, * and scalp. You might even feel your hair relaxing. *

Each slow, effortless breath brings relaxation to the head, * the face, * the neck, * and the shoulders. * Your hands, arms, shoulders and head are now completely relaxed and heavy. *

Now allow that feeling to flow down to the chest and upper back. As this happens you become more aware of your slow effortless abdominal breathing, and of your slow even heart rate. * The surface is now totally supporting your upper body. There is no effort on your part to hold it in its present position.

Let this relaxation flow down through your abdomen, * and lower back. * The lower torso and all those muscles are now relaxed and heavy. *

Let the feeling move down through the hips, * the thighs, * the calves, * and the feet. * Your entire body is now relaxed, warm and heavy.

Feel yourself spread out as you relax. Let your body sink into the surface that is supporting it. Your breathing is slow and effortless. Your heart rate is slow and even. *

Now, beginning at the top of your head and moving down, focus on each part of your body. One part at a time. Feel that part becoming heavier and more relaxed as you think

of it. When you reach your toes, enjoy that state of total relaxation for a few moments. *

* * * *

When you are ready to bring yourself back to a state of full alertness, do so by counting backward from five to one. When we reach the count of one, bend and stretch your arms, move your head from side to side and open your eyes. You will be fully awake, alert, calm and fully energized. You will feel relaxed and good about yourself.

Five..... becoming energized now, **Four**..... fully aware of your surroundings, more and more alert..... **Three**, relaxed and refreshed..... **Two**, wide awake and mentally alert..... **One**, eyes open, alert and refreshed. As you open your eyes you are alert, calm relaxed and full of energy.

Now, refer again to your "Relaxation Diary" and rate your level of relaxation at the moment.

Adapted from Albinson, J.G. and Bull, S.J. (1988); A Mental Game Plan: A Training Program for All Sports. London, Ontario, Spodym Publishers.

CLOCK RELAXATION

INTRODUCTION

This simple relaxation technique can be learned with only a few practices. There is no script and you can use either the progressive or autogenic procedure.

As with the other methods, it is helpful during the learning process, to record your level of relaxation or tension before and after each practice session.

In essence, the body is divided into twelve segments. The procedure involves concentrating on each part in sequence and inducing relaxation in that part.

This is an excellent relaxation technique for its simplicity, ease of learning and effectiveness.

- PROCESS** In Clock Relaxation, the body is divided into twelve segments, or areas, as shown in Fig. 4-1. This is just one example. Use any sequence or numbering system you prefer, then memorize it.
- COMFORTABLE** Start by getting comfortable. Close your eyes and relax your mouth.
- ASSESS TENSION** Focus on each numbered area in turn, as you systematically assess the amount of tension in that part. You may find different tension levels in different parts of the body.
- INDUCE RELAXATION** Concentrate on each part for 30 seconds, as you reduce the tension level and increase relaxation. After relaxing each body part, monitor your breathing rhythm. Concentrate on relaxing with each exhale.
- PRACTICE** The entire process should take about 6-10 minutes and is certain to leave you feeling calm and comfortable. As you continue to practice, you will increase your awareness and sensitivity to tension levels in the body.

Fig. 4-1



TEACHING

RELAXATION

Coaches, this skill is easy to teach! All you require is a basic understanding as presented in this unit, plus a willingness to experiment with scripts and procedures. But for those coaches who have little or no experience teaching this skill, here are some guidelines and a proven teaching sequence that will help.

1. REVIEW The first thing to do is read over the chosen script a few times, to become familiar with the content and flow of the material.

2. AUDIO TAPE If possible it would be very helpful to make a tape of the script, which can then be made available to all players or performers for home use. Alternately, they should be encouraged to create their own tape.

3. SEQUENCE Instruction can be given individually or to entire groups at once. The first step to learn to relax off-site. Then performers should practice applying the technique on-site at practices and finally, during competition or performance. The goal is to eventually automate the process, so that relaxation occurs on command.

4. PROGRESS Participants can monitor their progress using the "Relaxation Diary". The suggested time frames are completely flexible and should be adjusted to meet the needs of the performer(s).

THE PROGRAM _____ *ADAPTED FROM VERA PEZER; "PREPARING*

WEEKS 1 & 2.INDIVIDUAL OFF SITE

PURPOSE _____ To teach relaxation in a non-sport setting.

METHOD _____ Performers complete the chosen relaxation exercise at least 5 time per week, by;

- (a) Listening to a tape of the script at home,
- (b) Following written instructions provided by the _____ coach, or
- (c) Having someone read the script to them.

EVALUATION _____ Participants record their level of tension or relaxation before and after each session, in the Relaxation Diary. At this point, coaches should monitor individual progress and provide help where needed.

WEEK 3. COACH ASSISTED ON SITE

PURPOSE _____ To begin training performers to relax on-site.

METHOD _____ Coach allocates time at each practice, (15 minutes or so) when the performers rehearse relaxation. Coach can use a tape of the script, or read the script.

EVALUATION _____ Performers rate themselves in the "Relaxation Diary".

WEEK 4. COACH ASSISTED ON SITE

PURPOSE To continue on-site relaxation practice, with some coach induced stress.

METHOD Each relaxation session is preceded by a few moments of the coach creating stress for the performers. Here are some suggestions;

- (a) Coach is excessively critical about technique
- (b) Coach chastises performers legitimately.
- (c) Coach puts pressure on performers to increase conditioning, excellence level or some other aspect of performance.

SEQUENCE STRESS □ RATING □ RELAXATION □ RATING

EVALUATION Performers self-ratings in "Relaxation Diary", or mental self-ratings.

WEEKS 5 & 6. PERFORMER INITIATED

PURPOSE To continue mastery of relaxation skill, using performer induced stress and to start moving toward self-mastery.

METHOD Each relaxation session is preceded by a few moments when the performer create stress for themselves. Some possibilities are;

- (a) Negative self talk,
- (b) Review of past performance with less than positive results.
- (c) Thinking of upcoming competition.

EVALUATION Mental self-rating by performers.

SELF MASTERY

From this point on, performers continue practising relaxation in various settings, for complete self-mastery.

USEFUL RESOURCES

These, or comparable audio tapes are available in most public libraries or sport resource centers. Those listed here have been used extensively by the authors and found to be very effective.

- A) AUDIO TAPE - PREPARING MENTALLY TO PERFORM PHYSICALLY; (AUTOGENIC RELAXATION), VERA PEZER, UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN, SASKATOON, SK.
- B) AUDIO TAPE - LEARN TO RELAX; (AUTOGENIC) MAURICE KERSHAW; AMPEX 291 - AMPEX, CANADA
- C) AUDIO TAPE - IN PURSUIT OF PERSONAL EXCELLENCE; TERRY ORLICK; COACHING ASSOCIATION OF CANADA.
-