



Careers Centre

Dealing with nerves

This booklet covers some confidence building and relaxation techniques which can be used to help you deal with stress, worry, panic and nervousness caused by situations which may include interviews or presentations, a new job/placement, exams or just the stresses and strains of daily life.

You will find a range of different techniques and tips which can be practised in your own time. The list is not exhaustive but covers some of the most well known and well practised techniques. You may find there are some which you prefer to others; different things work for different people, so give them all a try and see what works for you. It is often the case that the more you practise the techniques, the more success you will have, so do persevere.

It is also worth mentioning the power of the mind; if you are open minded and believe a technique will work, it is much more likely that it will.

These techniques should be combined with a healthy lifestyle, including a healthy diet and exercise, issues that are also covered briefly in this booklet.

Relaxation Techniques

Progressive Muscular Relaxation (PMR)

This technique involves sequentially tensing and then relaxing all the muscles in the body. By tensing your muscles first, you become able to then relax them more fully and focus on the change of feeling. This helps you to overcome muscle tension, often associated with stress and anxiety.

- Find a quiet, warm room, where you can relax without distractions.
 - Remove your shoes if possible and wear loose comfortable clothing
 - Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on your back
 - The following technique should be repeated on each muscle. Recommended sequences can vary, but the order given below is one commonly used.
1. Focus on the muscle in question, inhale and squeeze the muscle as hard as you can for 8 seconds e.g. if it is your hand, make a tight fist.
 2. Really focus on the tension
 3. After 8 seconds exhale, release the tension and feel the tightness flow out of the muscle.
 4. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp, focus on the change and the difference between tension and relaxation.

Repeat this procedure with all of the muscles, working from the bottom to the top of the body.

Recommended Sequence

- Right Foot
- Right lower leg and foot
- Entire right leg
- Left foot
- Left lower leg and foot
- Entire left leg
- Hips and buttocks
- Right hand
- Right forearm and hand
- Entire right arm
- Left hand
- Left forearm and hand
- Entire left arm
- Abdomen
- Chest
- Neck and shoulders
- Face

Abdominal Breathing

Breathing techniques can help to calm us. This technique focuses on breathing deeply into the abdomen rather than taking shallow breaths into the chest, as we often do when we are stressed or nervous. This allows you to take in more oxygen and slow down your breathing. The more oxygen you take in, the less anxious and tense you will feel, giving a feeling of calm.

To ensure you are breathing correctly, you can place one hand on your stomach, to feel it expand and contract, and the other hand on your chest which should remain fairly still.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight, relax your shoulders. Alternatively, if possible, lie down.
- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen.
- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your **nose**. The hand on your stomach should rise, the other should hardly move. Hold your breath for a count of 2.
- Exhale slowly through your **mouth**, pushing out as much air as possible. The hand on your stomach should move in, your chest should move very little.
- You may find it helpful to count slowly as you breathe in and out.
- Some people say a positive word like “calm” or “relaxed” when inhaling and a negative word like “stress” when exhaling. This works by creating a sensation of exhaling and expelling all of your negative feelings and taking in good feelings.
- Repeat this exercise whenever you feel tense, nervous or panicky

Visualisation (or guided imagery)

Visualisation is a technique which can distract you from yourself and your worries momentarily, allowing you to slow your breathing and give back a feeling of control. It involves creating positive, detailed images in your mind, using imagination and memory to put yourself into a future you want to achieve or a place where you have experienced happiness, in order to relieve stress and/or increase confidence.

There are two commonly used methods of visualisation. The first involves vividly visualising an event that is happening in the future that you may be worried about (such as an interview) happening successfully. Seeing yourself already achieving your goal makes your brain believe that attaining that goal is possible. Athletes often use this form of visualisation. They might create a strong visual image of themselves winning, so that it almost feels like reality. Research in this area has found that athletes, who visualised practising their techniques and succeeding, performed as well as those practising for real. Already achieving your goal makes your brain believe that attaining that goal is possible.

“When you perform any task in real life, researchers have found, your brain uses the same identical processes it would use if you were only vividly visualising that activity. In other words, your brain sees no difference between visualising something and actually doing it”

Source: www.thesuccessprinciples.com

The second method involves visualising a relaxing scene that makes you feel good, either from memory or your imagination. This could be lying on a tropical beach or spending time with family or friends. This can help you to feel relaxed and calm.

For both methods

- Find a quiet area where you will not be disturbed and make yourself comfortable.
- Close your eyes.
- Focus on your breathing and let your imagination take over.
- It is important to view the action from the first person e.g. seeing yourself succeeding through your own eyes rather than watching from the outside.
- Visualise the event or scene as vividly as possible, so that it feels almost real. Use all of your senses to absorb what is happening around you.

Visualisation method 1

- Visualise the event that you are worried or nervous about happening, with you in a perfectly calm state.
- You feel purposeful and confident and everything goes well. Concentrate on everything around you, notice even the smallest details.
- Visualise yourself going through every physical step. This could begin with you walking into an interview room. What happens next? Do you shake hands? Go through the entire process of the event, successfully unfolding in your mind.
- What do you see?
- What can you hear/smell?
- What are you wearing?
- How are you feeling? As you accomplish what you are doing and want to achieve, feel the success.
- Practise visualising this positive clear message over and over again.

Visualisation method 2

Used to relax and calm you. This can be used for any situation you are facing, or in day to day life.

- Create a scene in your mind, real or imaginary that makes you feel safe, warm and peaceful. This could be you lying on a beach somewhere with the sun shining; it could be spending time with family or friends or sitting in a park on a summer's day, whatever makes you feel happy and relaxed.
- Once you have thought of that scene, make yourself aware of all of your senses to visualise it as vividly as you can.
- What can you **hear**? Birds singing? Crashing waves? The wind blowing?
- What can you **feel**? The warm sun on your back? The sand between your toes? The warmth of an open fire?
- What can you **see**? Look all around you.
- What can you **taste**? Is it the salty sea air? Maybe you are eating or drinking?
- What can you **smell**? Freshly cut grass? Pine trees? Sun cream?
- Concentrate on what is happening all around you. You should feel like your visualisation is almost reality.
- All the time you are feeling calmer and more relaxed.
- Practise this over and over again and take yourself back to that place whenever you need to relax or calm yourself.

Anchoring

A technique by which an association or link is made between something sensory such as a sight, sound, touch or smell with a particular emotional feeling. Many of these links are formed naturally; think about how particular smells can evoke certain emotions and bring memories flooding back. Perhaps you associate a particular perfume with a loved one so it makes you feel good whenever you smell it? We can use this technique to form these links artificially, training ourselves to make particular associations in order to help ourselves feel a particular way when triggered.

Try this anchoring technique:

- Really get into a state of calm, think of past experiences when you felt calm, take yourself back to that experience.
- It is important to "fire" the anchor at the peak of your relaxed state (or whatever emotion you are using).

- At this point, hold one of your wrists with the opposite hand.
- Gently insert pressure with your thumb and say to yourself "calm". Concentrate on your breathing and relax, keeping that pressure on your wrist.
- Release your wrist and change your state by standing up, moving around and shaking yourself out if it, thinking of unrelated thoughts.
- Repeat this process and practise this regularly, always using the same wrist and pressure point.
- Eventually a link or association will be formed so that whenever you repeat this action, you will automatically feel calm.
- The more repetitions you do, the more conditioned the anchor becomes.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be difficult to define as it is a very subtle process. Here is one attempt to define it:

"Mindfulness is a state of present awareness. A relaxed state of mind, in which we are conscious of our experience, including sensations, thoughts and feelings, breathing and surroundings, all with an attitude of non-resistance, peace and acceptance."

This technique involves concentrating only on what you are doing in the present moment. By focusing on the present moment you shift your focus away from worrying about the past or future.

Mindful meditation could involve any range of daily activities or experiences. The most important thing is that you focus on what you are doing, without over analysing.

Try these Mindful Meditation techniques:

Mindful Eating

- Sit down at the table for a meal without the distraction of the TV, newspapers or radio.
- Focus completely on your food. Take slow mouthfuls, focusing on the flavour and texture of the food, taking the time to fully enjoy each bite.
- As your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the present moment.

Walking

- As you are walking, focus fully on each step, the sensation on your feet as they touch the ground, the natural swinging of your arms, the rhythm of your breathing and the wind in your face.
- Again, as your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the current moment.

For more information see www.bemindful.co.uk and www.getsomeheadspace.com

Self massage

Self massage is a great way to relax your muscles, which in turn, relaxes your mind. There are many different types of self massage. Here are a couple for you to try:

Scalp Soother

Place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.

Shoulder Tension Relief

Reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

Source: www.helpguide.org

Keep things in perspective

Lighten up and “Don’t sweat the small stuff”!

- Most things that we are worried about never even happen and those that do are rarely as bad as we anticipate.
- Most of our worries are also relatively trivial in the grand scheme of things, no matter how bad they may seem at the time.
- Ask yourself, in 5 or 10 years, or even as soon as next year, how important will today’s worries be to your life?
- Think back 5 years about what you were worried about. Most of your worries are probably so insignificant now that you will have trouble remembering them.

Confidence Boosting Tips

Affirmations or self talk

An affirmation is a positive statement, which is very personal to you, written in the first person and present tense. It is describing a desired

situation of what is happening **now**, not in the past or future and can be used to replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts. It is important to only use positive language in your affirmations. So rather than saying “I am no longer nervous” you might say “I am becoming more and more confident”.

People often repeat negative statements in their minds without even realising it. How often have you said to yourself “I can’t do it” or “I’m not good enough”? Your subconscious mind accepts what you keep saying to yourself as true. For example, if you keep telling yourself you will fail, you probably will. The good news is, positive statements can have the same effect. Regularly practising positive self talk will eventually enable you to drown out negative thoughts and believe the positive thoughts.

Here are some examples to get you started:

“I am the strongest candidate for the job”.

“I am perfectly capable of achieving this and I will”.

“I can handle this”.

“They want me to succeed and I will”.

- Try and come up with some affirmations which are personal to you.
- Write your affirmations down, perhaps on a Post-it note and stick them somewhere you will see them every day, such as your mirror, in your diary or on your computer screen.
- It is important to say your affirmations out loud to yourself as often as you can.
- You could do the same thing with some of your favourite positive quotes.

Acting “As if”

- Think of a person you see as confident. It could be someone you know, or it could be somebody famous. Try to work out what it is about them that makes them appear confident. It is probably a combination of things.
- Body language is so powerful that we know instinctively when we see a confident person. Try to look more closely at specifically what it is about their body language and other behaviour that combine to make them appear confident. If possible, study photographs or videos of the person.
- Look at the way they walk and hold themselves.
- Focus on how they speak, what they say and how they interact with others.

- Look at their expressions and use of eye contact.
- See how other people react to and interact with them.
- Once you have done all of these things, practise copying them, using all of the same techniques that you have noted them use.
- Take note of changes in the way you feel and the way other people's reaction to you changes.
- Whenever you are facing a difficult situation and your confidence is low, imagine how that person would react and act out what they would do, taking on their persona and feeling their confidence.
- Pretending to be confident is not that different from being confident; keep practising and it will soon become second nature to you!

Body language and posture

- Our body language gives powerful signals to the world about how we feel about ourselves. When you lack confidence you tend to make yourself look smaller, avoiding drawing attention to yourself, perhaps by lowering your head, slumping or crossing your arms or legs.
- By recognising this, you can change your body language to make yourself appear confident, even if you don't feel confident. Interestingly, by practising confident body language, you can change not only the way you appear to others, but the way you think and feel inside. If you "act" confident, you will eventually feel confident.
- Look out for confident people – what is their body language like? How do they walk/stand? What are their expressions like? Try to copy what they do and see how you feel.

Try this exercise

- Practise sitting or standing confidently, with an upright posture. Relax, keeping your arms and legs uncrossed. Hold your head high and smile. How do you feel?
- Change your position so that your arms and legs are crossed. Slump in your chair and hang your head down towards the floor. How do you feel now? See how your body language can be a powerful tool in changing the way you feel? It is very difficult to display negative body language and to feel positive, and vice versa.

- Body language not only changes the way people perceive you, it also changes the way you feel!

Dress confidently

Your clothes can have a profound effect on the way you feel. Dress like the confident person you want to be. This is particularly important in situations like interviews. If you look the part, you will feel the part!

Wear something you know you will feel both confident and comfortable in.

Talk to your friends and family

We are often unaware of our own strengths and qualities. If you doubt yourself, ask the people close to you what they think you are good at/what they like about you. You may be surprised at how many things they come up with and it will certainly give your confidence a boost.

Make a list of all these positive attributes, and read them every time your confidence needs boosting.

Focus on your achievements

Write a list of all the things you have achieved in the last 2 years. These could be both personal and work/study related. It could be achieving good grades in an exam, passing your driving test, or overcoming a personal fear, such as heights. Remember how difficult and overwhelming these things seemed at the time...but you still overcame them. This will give you the confidence in your ability to achieve whatever you want in life.

Exercise

Try the exercise at the back of this booklet to help you focus on how you reached your achievements in the past, and how this can help you to reach your goals in the future.

Preparation

Often, our nerves are caused by a fear of the unknown, not knowing how a situation will pan out, or fear that something will go wrong. The best way to overcome this is by preparation. This will give you back a sense of control.

- If you have a looming interview, presentation or exam, ensuring you are well prepared will make you feel more relaxed and confident, both before and during the event.
- To prepare for an interview, ensure that you have thought out well in advance and feel confident about the types of questions you are likely to be asked, and your responses, what you are going to wear and how you are going to get there, taking a practice run if necessary. See our **Interviews booklet** for more tips.
- For presentations make sure you have rehearsed what you are going to say and have practised out loud in front of someone. Time yourself to make sure your talk is the correct length. The more you practise, the more relaxed you will be for the real thing. Ensure you have planned and practised using any slides and checked what equipment will be available on the day. If possible, practise in the room you will be using.
- Eat complex carbohydrates such as wholegrains, fruit and vegetables. These will give you sustained energy, stabilise blood sugar and boost serotonin, which has a calming effect on the body.
- Get enough sleep – Although anxiety can disrupt your sleep, it is important to try and get 7- 8 hours per night. Lack of sleep compromises your ability to cope with stress, and you may find yourself feeling irritable and unable to concentrate. If you are having trouble sleeping try some of the following:
- Avoid anything that may disrupt your sleep such as a noisy/stressful environment, using the computer and eating or consuming caffeine late at night.

Exercise

- Try to stick to a regular bed time and sleep pattern to get your body into a routine.
- A warm bath with relaxing oils such as lavender before bed can often help you to wind down.
- Try some of the relaxation tips in the booklet, such as self massage

Inspiring Quotes

- **“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”** Benjamin Franklin.
- **“Confidence is preparation, everything else is beyond your control.”** Richard Kline.

Look at your lifestyle

A healthy lifestyle is important in maintaining a healthy body and mind.

Exercise and diet can have a big effect on how you feel mentally as well as physically.

- Aerobic exercise helps to burn off some of the adrenaline and subsequent symptoms produced as a result of “fight or flight”, helping you to feel calmer. It releases stress and tension and increases energy. It also releases endorphins (the body’s natural feel good chemical) giving you an instant mood boost.
- Regular exercise can often mean stress is less likely to affect you, acting as a preventative measure.
- Limit caffeine and sugar – Caffeine can cause anxiety and disrupt sleep. Refined sugars cause a rapid spike followed by a crash in blood sugar, leaving you feeling drained.

Finally...accept that nerves are normal

It might not always be obvious, but everybody feels nervous at times, particularly when facing something new or important to them, such as a job interview. A certain amount of nerves can be helpful and can even improve performance; it is just a matter of controlling them to keep them at a useful rather than damaging level. Those people who never seem nervous have just mastered the art of controlling their nerves and using them to their advantage.

Further information

Books

Carlson, R. (2003) *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff...and it's All Small Stuff*, Hyperion, New York

Corfield, R. (2010) *Knockout Job Interview Presentations: How to present with confidence, beat the competition and impress your way into a top job*, Kogan, London

Jeffers, S. (2007) *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, Vermillion, London

Preston, D.L. (2010) *365 Steps to Self-Confidence*, How To Books, Oxford

Sutton, S. (2006) *Relax and Make your Stress Work for You*, BBC Active, Harlow

Websites

Helpguide www.helpguide.org

Mind www.mind.org.uk/information/factsheets

Various booklets and help guides related to confidence and dealing with nerves.

Be Mindful www.bemindful.co.uk

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Your Achievements and Aspirations

Think of something that you have done in the past 12 months that you are proud of – it doesn't have to be a big thing and it doesn't have to be connected to work or study.

Write your **achievement** here

<p>What obstacles did you have to overcome to achieve this?</p>	<p>What helped you to achieve it? <i>Consider your qualities and skills, and the resources and people who helped you.</i></p>
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Now think of something that you want to do in the next 12 months that you are nervous of – again, it doesn't have to be a big thing and it doesn't have to be connected to work or study.

Write your **aspiration** here

<p>What obstacles will you have to overcome to realise this aspiration?</p>	<p>What will help you to realise this aspiration? <i>Consider your qualities and skills, and the resources and people who can help you.</i></p>
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