

CORE CONCEPT: *We can take charge of our feelings.*

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

PURPOSE

To help the pupils to become aware of their usual breathing pattern.

To teach the pupils the idea that deep breathing is a quick and easy way to relaxation.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

For this exercise space for pupils to move round freely and to lie down is needed.

A mat, towel, rug or sleeping bag for each pupil, if possible. Otherwise, it should be done in a carpeted room.

Outline

1. Miming contradictory feelings
2. Teacher input
3. Demonstration and practice of the FULL DEEP BREATH
4. Discussion
5. Homework

Detailed Procedure

1. Miming contradictory feelings

Ask pupils to stand up and to mime 'feeling anxious'. They are to exaggerate all the bodily aspects of feeling anxious and to move around 'anxiously'. Let this go on for three or four minutes, encouraging people to stay in the 'anxious' posture.

Ask for feedback while they are still in this position.

- *What are you doing with your body?*
- *What does it feel like?*

List the physical characteristics of feeling anxious (tight or stiff muscles, hunched shoulders, holding breath, tight neck, frowning). Ask students to say out any words that come to mind that describe how they are feeling .

After a minute or two of this, tell students you now want them to mime 'feeling completely relaxed'. Again they can exaggerate the feeling (even to the extent of lying down on the floor – though you should not suggest this.) Encourage quietness and make sure that those lying down are not walked on.

Repeat the feedback procedure as for 'feeling anxious' (loose muscles, breathing deeply, yawning, floppy arms, etc.).

Now tell them you want them to mime being anxious and relaxed *at the same time*.

Ask for feedback.

- *Was anyone able to do that?*

2. Teacher input

- You cannot be anxious and relaxed at the same time!
and ask students whether or not this is true.

Input:

This statement is, in fact, the basis of all stress reduction methods. When the body is relaxed, breathing is slow and deep; the heart rate decreases; muscles relax and return to their normal resting state; blood-flow to the extremities (feet and hands) is increased – in brief, your whole system is slowed down. If you can induce even one of these ‘signs’ of relaxation through the use of one of the exercises in this part of the programme, you can break into the stress reaction and produce what is called instead –

‘THE RELAXATION RESPONSE’

The relaxation exercises we are going to learn can be used as either preventive measures or as corrective ones if you are already feeling stressed.

The most essential part of learning to relax is learning to breathe the FULL DEEP BREATH, so that is the first thing we are going to practise. It may seem strange to say that we need to learn how to breathe, as we all must be breathing if we are still alive! However, many if not most people do not know how to breathe properly. We have been taught to hold our tummies in and push our chests out. This actually prevents proper breathing. We wear clothes, which are often quite constricting so we might have to open a button to be able to breathe fully.

Why the deep, full breath? Breathing properly is healthy: when you are tense or upset, your breathing becomes shallow and irregular, and your heart rate tends to speed up. When you are relaxed your breathing deepens and your heart rate slows down. Breathing is the easiest part of the stress response to control. If you can trigger the deep, slow breath essential to relaxation, then you can trigger the rest of the characteristics of the relaxation response.

3. Demonstration and practice of the FULL DEEP BREATH

Tell pupils you are now going to do an experiment – *How do you breathe?*

Ask them to lie down on the floor and give them the following instructions or demonstrate with one pupil first and then continue.

- Place one hand just below the rib cage (above the stomach). Take a deep breath and, as you breathe in, notice the movement of your hand.
... *Does it move in or out?*
... *Does it move at all?*
- If you breathed properly your hand moved outward. Be aware of how deeply you breathe.

Imagine that your lungs are divided into three parts. Close your eyes and see the three parts in your mind. In the full deep breath the lowest part of the lungs fills with air first; then the middle part fills and the chest expands; then the upper part fills with air and the shoulders may move slowly upwards.

Take another breath and imagine this happening – the lowest part, then the middle of your chest expands and finally the upper part.

- *Is this the way you usually breathe?*

Take another deep breath. Do you breathe in through your nose or through your mouth? How do you breathe out? Do you breathe out fully and completely? In breathing for relaxation remember to breathe in through your nose and fill your lungs completely. Breathe again, breathing in through your nose. Picture your lungs filling slowly with air; feel your abdomen pushing out your hand. Then breathe out through your mouth and feel the warm air leave your body. You may feel a bit uncomfortable breathing in just through your nose. Find what suits you, what feels right – but do begin to breathe the deep, slow, relaxing breath rather than the rapid-shallow-shoulder-chest breath.

Breathe in, and hold your breath for ten second, feeling the tension in your throat and chest.

Breathe out through your mouth with a slight sigh and feel the 'sigh of relief' release the tension. The calmest or quietest time of the breath is between breathing out and breathing in again. If you can feel the calmness at that moment directly after breathing out, at the end of the sign, then you are learning how to relax.

Breathe in again; breathe out with a soft sigh. As you breathe out fully and completely, feel the tension melting away out of your body. Take note of this quiet time in your body. When you are feeling tense or anxious, remember this and try to recapture that moment of peace and calm.

4. Reflection

- What was it like for you? Difficult or easy? What did you discover about the way you breathe?
- *How are you feeling now? Is there any difference between the way you feel now and how you felt before doing the deep breathing?*
- *Can you think of situations where it would be helpful to take a full, deep breath?*

Do not forget the calming effect of the deep breath. When people become tense they often forget to breathe – breathing properly can help you to cope better with stressful situations. *It can also help to prevent tension building up* – try to take a deep breath many times during the day, even if you are not feeling stressed.

- *What signal or even could you use to remind you to take a deep breath?*

5. Homework

Every day during the coming week, take 10 minutes to practise the full deep breath. Also, try to use it at moments when you notice yourself getting tense.

Some Points:

- Find a regular time and a quiet place to practise these exercises. Your health and feeling of well-being are important, so do not be afraid to tell people not to interrupt you. It takes regular practice to get so good at doing these that you can just use them at the drop of a hat.
- Practise on an empty stomach.

