

# Anxiety



“The intricate thought processes that mark these individuals as gifted are mirrored in the intricacy of their emotional development. Idealism, self-doubt, perceptiveness, excruciating sensitivity, moral imperatives, and desperate needs for understanding, acceptance, and love – all impinge simultaneously. Their vast emotional range makes them appear contradictory: mature and immature, arrogant and compassionate, aggressive and timid. Semblances of composure and self-assurance often mask deep feelings of insecurity. The inner experience of the gifted young person is rich, complex and turbulent.”

***Linda Silverman***

Silverman, Linda (ed.). (1993) *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*. Denver: Love Publishing

Sometimes people like to believe that talented and gifted kids have it all together. Since they are above average to superior in their intellectual abilities, it is assumed that they are internally motivated, self-confident, insightful, and academically proficient. The proof for this is found in their superior academic performance and unusual passion for learning about things at a more advanced level. However, the exact opposite is what many IMSA kids may experience. In the quote above, Linda Silverman indicates that “semblances of composure and self-assurance often mask deep feelings of insecurity.” This can make the emotional life of the talented and gifted adolescent both “complex and turbulent.”

Before coming to IMSA we hear from students that they usually earned straight A's, always got their homework done on time (what little they had to do)

had no difficulty writing papers (which were usually no longer than 2-3 pages), did not have to study for tests, and spent a fair amount of time helping other students in the classroom (some to the point of helping the teacher teach the class!). By the end of their first semester at IMSA, all this has changed. Suddenly they are no longer at the top of the class. They actually have homework to do at night, and lots of it. They earn B's and C's on assignments instead of the automatic A's they were used to getting. In History and English classes they are learning to write 7-10 page papers using primary source material and accurate references. In math the teaching is inquiry based and occurs in groups and through homework assignments involving work sheets and problems sets. There may not even be a math text book involved! The concept of "learning how to solve a specific problem and then solving 15 similar problems" is gone. They are now taught to "think mathematically." They even have to write papers and take tests in their Wellness Electives, which is IMSA's equivalent to physical fitness classes (remember gym?). More often than not, students must meet with teachers, form study groups, seek out a peer tutor, or spend time in the math office or writing center to be successful. This is not because they are not "smarter" than some of the other students in their classes. It is because this is the ideal way to learn advanced material that requires higher cognitive function and integration. In other words, they can't do it alone and the system is set up that way from the start. This is the essence of a problem based learning model implemented by active inquiry.



When you combine the various components of the IMSA academic and social environment with the characteristics of being a talented and gifted adolescent, you can end up with a very anxious student! Of course, basic anxiety is a necessary component of the learning process. Anxiety sharpens the senses, increases awareness and supplies the energy behind the motivation to succeed. It is only when the anxiety is overwhelming that it becomes a problem. Part of being a successful student in

any academic setting is to develop tools and strategies for managing anxiety. Some students arrive at IMSA with a diagnosed anxiety disorder for which they are receiving treatment. These disorders would include the following:

- **Acute Stress Disorder**: result of a traumatic event in which the person experienced or witnessed an event that involved threatened or actual serious injury or death and responded with intense fear and helplessness.
- **Agoraphobia**: anxiety about being in places where escape might be difficult or embarrassing or in which help may not be available should a panic attack develop.
- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**: Often anxiety gets generalized to other situations, and can then become overwhelming or associated with life in general.
- **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)**: obsessions (persistent, often irrational, and seemingly uncontrollable thoughts) and compulsions (actions which are used to neutralize the obsessions).
- **Panic Disorder**: sudden attacks of intense fear or worry usually associated with numerous physical symptoms such as heart palpitations, rapid breathing or shortness of breath, blurred vision, dizziness, and racing thoughts.
- **Phobias**: Symptoms can include both extreme anxiety and fear associated with the object or situation or can result in extreme avoidance of these things. Includes **Social Anxiety Disorder**: also called social phobia, it is an anxiety disorder in which a person has an excessive and unreasonable fear of social situations. Anxiety (intense nervousness) and self-consciousness arise from a fear of being closely watched, judged, and criticized by others.
- **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**: PTSD can follow a traumatic event which causes intense fear and/or helplessness in an individual. Symptoms include re-experiencing the trauma through nightmares, obsessive thoughts, and flashbacks (feeling as if you are actually in the traumatic situation again). There is an avoidance component as well, where the individual avoids situations, people, and/or objects which remind him or her about the traumatic event.

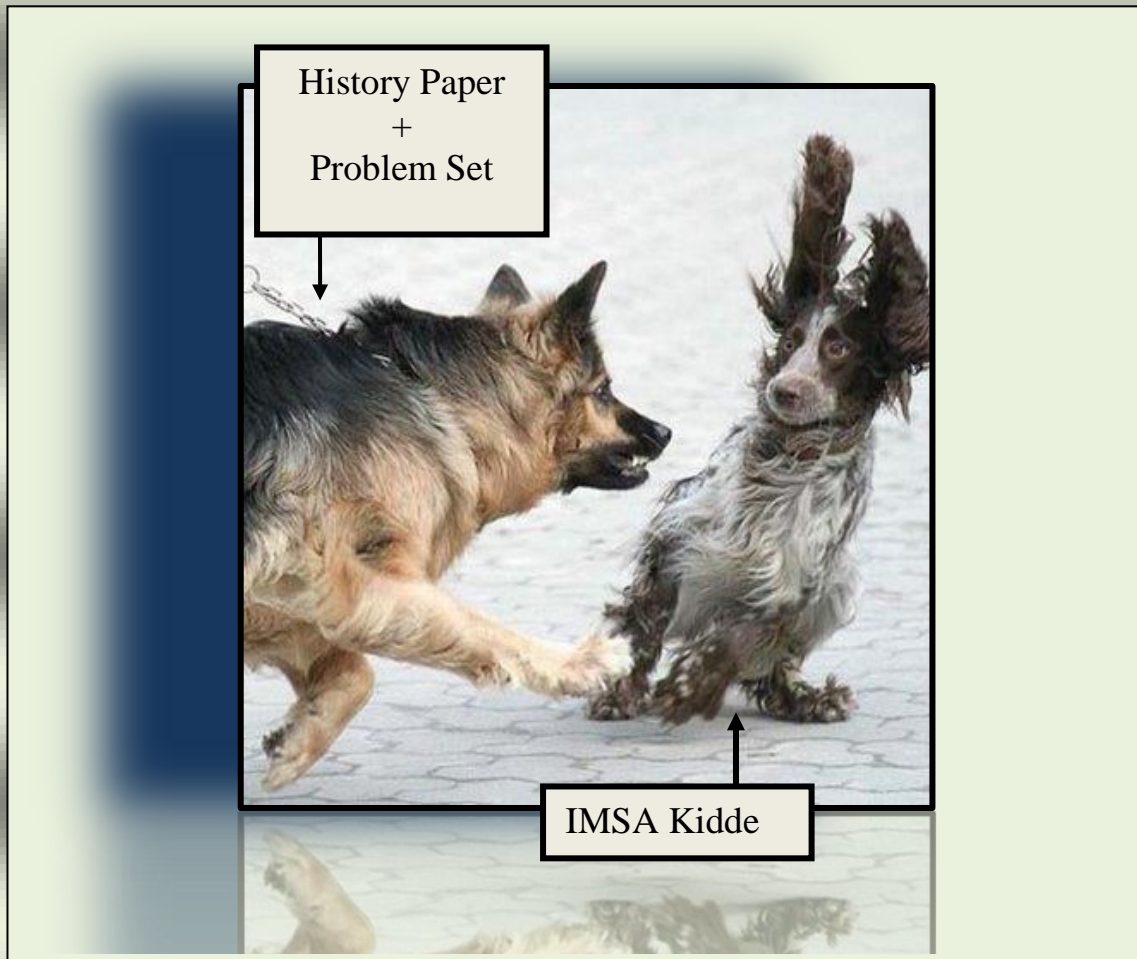
Most students do not experience anxiety to this degree. However, even students with a diagnosed anxiety disorder will have to develop skills for dealing with the “normal” anxiety generated by their IMSA experience.

## *What is considered “normal” anxiety?*

Anxiety	Vs.	Fear
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>@No identifiable triggering stimulus</li><li>@Focused on dealing with future negative events</li><li>@Related to situations perceived as uncontrollable or unavoidable</li><li>@ Basically irrational</li></ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>@Emotional response to a perceived threat</li><li>@Focused on dealing with a present danger</li><li>@Related to behaviors of escape and avoidance</li><li>@Basically rational</li></ul>

From the examples above you can see that there is a difference between anxiety and fear. Fear responses are often obvious. They are in response to a stimulus that is actually occurring, is tangible, and identifiable. This does not always have to be a response to something like a tornado or a mouse sneaking into a student’s dorm room (hey, they get cold too you know). Let’s say that the student studies thoroughly for an exam and feels pretty good after taking it. The next day they find out they got a “D.” The normal fear is that this might happen again no matter how well prepared they feel. The anxiety comes into play when they try to understand *how* this happened. The grade of “D” is observable and real and the anxious feeling is at least a rational reaction to something the student believes should be feared and avoided. But they studied thoroughly. They understood the

material and felt good after taking the exam. So *how* did this happen? There is no identifiable reason. Is this going to happen again in this class? In other classes? Maybe the teacher hates me. “OMG... I’ll never get into a good college!” Welcome to the irrational. The student feels trapped with no way out. This is when anxiety levels begin to rise. Unless these feelings are modulated and controlled in some way, the anxiety can become troublesome and actually paralyze the student in their attempt to find a solution.



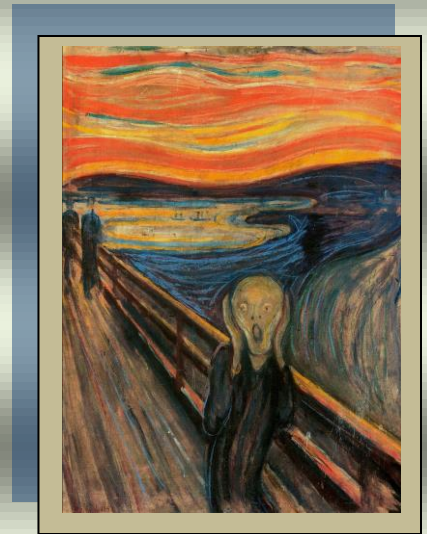
### Definition:

**Anxiety** is characterized by an overwhelming sense of apprehension; the expectation that something bad is happening or will happen. The feeling of anxiety is a *psychological* and *physiological* state characterized by physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioral components.



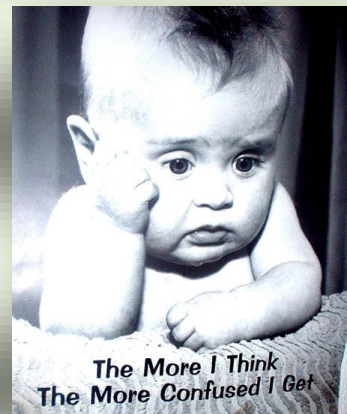
## *Physical Symptoms of Anxiety*

- Dry Mouth
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Neck pain
- Stomach upset
- Numbness of hands
- Dizziness
- Blurred vision, tunnel vision, seeing black spots
- Chest pain
- Breathlessness or shortness of breath
- Hyperventilation
- Clenching jaw or fists
- Restlessness, difficulty sitting still
- Insomnia, problems falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep



## *Cognitive Symptoms of Anxiety*

- ✚ Difficulty concentrating
- ✚ Problems thinking clearly
- ✚ Distractibility
- ✚ Mental fatigue
- ✚ Memory problems
- ✚ Decreased problem solving abilities
- ✚ Negative thinking
- ✚ Mild to moderate confusion



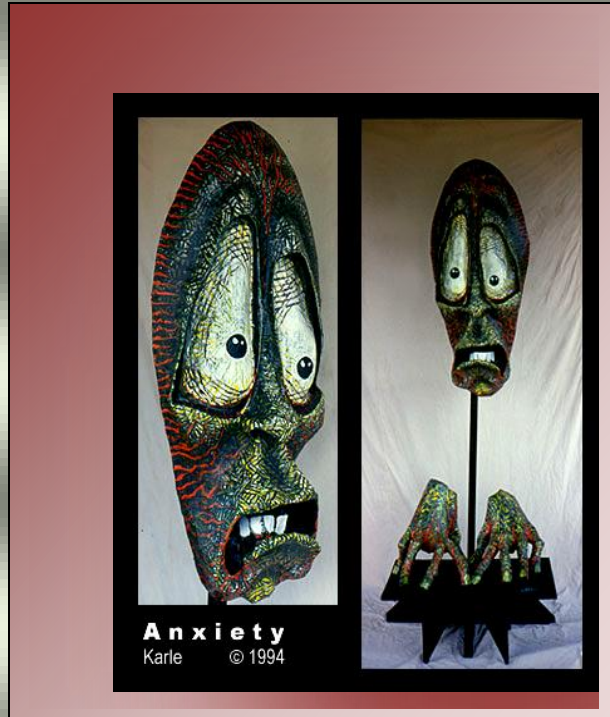
## *Emotional Symptoms of Anxiety*

- Irritability
- Anger
- Fearful
- Suspicion
- Agitation
- Embarrassment
- Feelings of impending doom
- Fear of having a heart attack or feeling like you are dying



# Managing the anxiety

(<http://www.innerhealthstudio.com/definition-of-anxiety.html>)



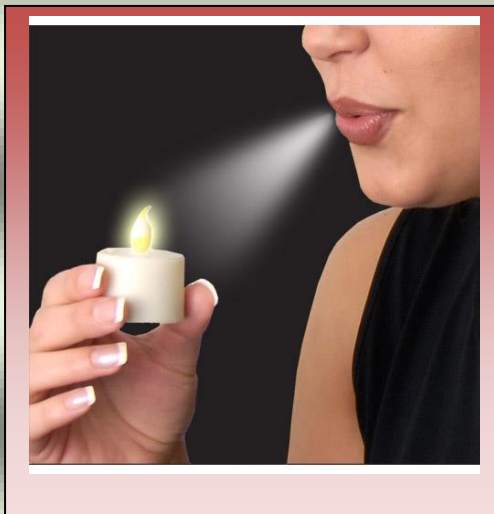
Anxiety and depression are not fun things to manage. They generate feelings like powerlessness and hopelessness that only serve to increase the anxiety or despair. Since anxiety is often an irrational response to a situation, the best way to begin managing it is to introduce some *rationality* into the equation. The first step is to acknowledge the anxiety. Everyone gets anxious. You are not alone. The feelings you are having are not weird and do not indicate that you are a “faulty” person of some kind. Intelligent people, especially adolescents, believe they should solve problems themselves without asking for

help. When it comes to emotional problems or concerns, they often view them as weaknesses that should not be shared. Other people might see their “flaws” and view them as less competent. Perhaps people will simply not understand what they are going through and make a negative judgment about them. This is why some kids say everything is fine when it is not, or they deny feeling anxious and fearful because they do not want to upset their parents or friends. So the first step is to acknowledge it. It’s here and it’s OK, but it is very unpleasant and tough to get through. This is at least an honest, rational belief. Often times denying it, avoiding it and hiding it only serve to make the anxiety stronger. **Here are some other things that will help reduce or manage anxious feelings:**

- Make yourself as comfortable as possible while the feeling passes. Most anxiety will pass if given enough time. Remember that fighting it, denying it or ignoring it can make it worse. Remind yourself that the feeling will get better and reduce itself eventually. In the mean time, concentrate on making yourself comfortable physically and emotionally. Get in a comfortable position, stretch your muscles, and loosen tight clothing. If you are sitting, get up and stretch or walk around, then lie down or find a more comfortable chair. You can lie on the bed and put a pillow under your legs to raise them

up and take the pressure off your lower back. This helps ease tension in the stomach and back area. Put a pillow under your neck to support your head. Now take a slow deep breath in through your nose and let it out through your mouth. Repeat this several times. Give yourself permission to relax. Take the time you need.

- Pay attention to your breathing. Using controlled breathing is a good way to modulate intense feelings like anger and anxiety. Breathing into a paper bag is not effective unless you are hyperventilating (rapid, uncontrollable breathing that is usually caused by a surge of adrenalin). Rather, take a slow deep breath in through your nose and then blow it slowly out through your mouth. Pucker your lips slightly, like you are blowing out a birthday candle, and let the natural pressure in your lungs force the air out. Slow and steady breathing: slowly in through the nose and slowly out through the mouth until you can feel your breathing becoming more regular.



Use this facial posture for controlled exhaling.



Do this *only* if hyperventilating and *only* until breathing returns to normal.

- Use calming self-talk. What we say to ourselves when experiencing anxiety can cause us to feel more anxious. It may not seem as simple as that, but it is. What is the first thing we are told to do in an emergency? Stay calm.



Don't panic. Why? Because yelling, screaming, crying and thinking terrible thoughts only cause us to not think clearly. We can become easily overwhelmed and then paralyzed by fear. Anxiety is in the same biochemical family as fear. They are on the same continuum. As you can see by the example below, anxious feelings are not pleasant feelings. The words we use to describe the feelings are not reassuring and leave little room for positive self talk.



Right behind the words we use to describe the anxious feelings are the thoughts that feed the severity of the anxiety:

- ✿ "I can't do this."
- ✿ "This is too much for me to handle."
- ✿ "It's all going to ruin my life."
- ✿ "These feelings are too intense, I can't stand it."
- ✿ "It will never go away."

- ✿ “I’m always going to be like this.”
- ✿ “What am I going to do? I can’t cope with this.”
- ✿ “It’s only going to get worse.”
- ✿ “My God! Am I going to have a panic attack?”
- ✿ “I hate myself. I never do anything right!”

And on and on. In most stressful situations, these negative thoughts come automatically. We have to actively find the words and construct the thoughts to manage the fear. The more we work at it the more automatic these thoughts become during stressful situations. Here are some examples:

### **“I can’t stand it... this is too much for me to handle...”**

- “OK, relax. You can handle this. Just take it one step at a time. What needs to happen here? What should I do first? Just breathe...”

### **“This is only going to get worse... I hope I don’t have a panic attack... I’ll make a fool out of myself...”**

- “Hang on. I’m safe for now...it’s not that terrible... stressful, yes... terrible, no.... I don’t have to panic. Calm down... that’s good. Other people get through this kind of thing.... so can I.”

### **“Great! I don’t know what I’m doing here... I’m going to fail this stupid thing... I never do anything right... what an idiot I am... so much for college!”**

- All right... slow down. Worse thing is that I fail it and have to do better next time. This has got nothing to do with college... I can do this... OK. Let’s relax and figure out what I do know here....

The best way to sabotage any attempt at managing the anxiety is to say these kinds *realistic* things in response to the anxious thoughts and then *refuse* to believe them: “Boy, that sounds nice... but it’s all a lie anyway.” Again, the words themselves can make the anxiety a little better, a lot better, somewhat better or just plain worse. The reality is you can slow down. You can relax. You can handle it. It really is not the end of the world. This is bad, but it can be manageable. And even if the worse happens, you can adjust and figure out the next right thing to do. Also

remember, you don't have to be alone when doing it. Find somebody and talk with them!

- Distract yourself. Distraction is an effective way of putting your mind on something *other* than the anxiety symptoms you are experiencing, and is a surprisingly effective way to treat anxiety. It is difficult for the mind to focus on more than one thing at once. Multi-tasking does not work when trying to manage anxiety! Anxiety causes us to be flooded with many different thoughts and feelings. We obsess, worry and become easily overwhelmed. If you find something to focus on intently, your mind will not be able to maintain the anxiety for long. Here are some examples:

- ⊕ Focus on the lecture during class
- ⊕ Pay closer attention to the problem you are working on
- ⊕ Do slow and steady breathing exercises
- ⊕ Think of a favorite place and what you might be doing there
- ⊕ Focus on positive coping statements
- ⊕ Watch what someone else is doing
- ⊕ Get outside yourself and talk to someone
- ⊕ Read
- ⊕ Do something physical like exercise or just walk
- ⊕ Break study tasks into smaller segments and give it your best attention possible

- Relaxation techniques. Relaxation is the body's natural anxiety cure because relaxation techniques actually reverse the stress response. According to the Mayo Clinic, there are several main types of relaxation techniques. The following is quoted directly from their website:

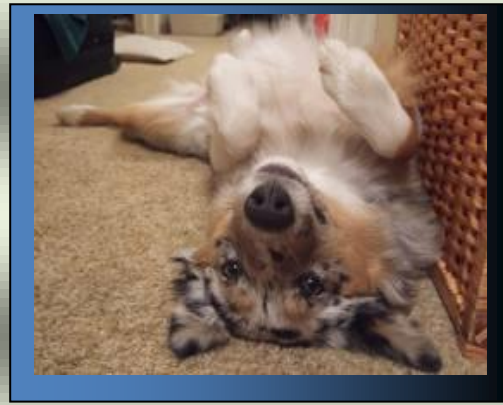
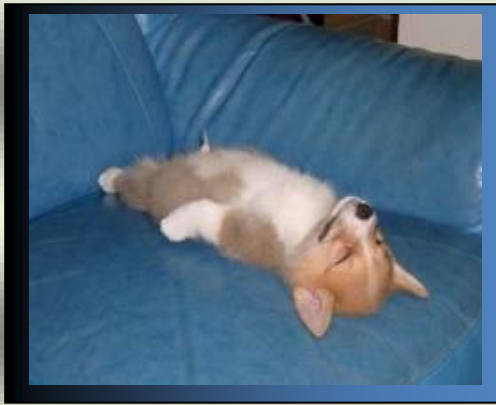
(<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/relaxation-technique/SR00007/NSECTIONGROUP=2>) :

**Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

**Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this relaxation technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you

focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.

**Visualization.** In this relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.”



### **Guidelines for Practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation (or Any Form of Deep Relaxation)** <http://www.hypnos.co.uk/hypnomag/jacobson.htm>

The following guidelines will help you make the most use of progressive muscle relaxation. They are also applicable to *any* form of deep relaxation you undertake to practice regularly, including self-hypnosis, guided visualization, and meditation.

1. Practice at least 20 minutes per day. Two 20-minute periods are preferable. Once a day is mandatory for obtaining generalization effects. (You may want to begin your practice with 30-minute periods. As you gain skill in relaxation technique, you will find that the amount of time you need to experience the relaxation response will decrease.)
2. Find a quiet location to practice where you won't be distracted. Don't permit the phone to ring while you're practicing. Use a fan or air conditioner to blot out background noise if necessary.

3. Practice at regular times. On awakening, before retiring, or before meals are generally the best times. A consistent daily relaxation routine will increase the likelihood of generalization effects.
4. Practice on an empty stomach. Food digestion after meals will tend to disrupt deep relaxation.
5. Assume a comfortable position. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported. Lying down on a sofa or bed or sitting in a reclining chair are two ways of supporting your body most completely. (When lying down, you may want to place a pillow beneath your knees for further support.) Sitting up is preferable to lying down if you are feeling tired and sleepy. It's advantageous to experience the full depth of the relaxation response consciously without going to sleep.
6. Loosen any tight clothing and take off shoes, watch, glasses, contact lenses, jewelry, and so on.
7. Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day. Allow taking care of yourself and having peace of mind to take precedence over any of your worries. (Success with relaxation depends on giving peace of mind high priority in your overall scheme of values.)
8. Assume a passive, detached attitude. This is probably the most important element. You want to adopt a "let it happen" attitude and be free of any worry about how well you are performing the technique. Do not *try* to relax. Do not *try* to control your body. *Do not judge your performance.* The point is to let go.

## **Progressive Muscle Relaxation Technique**

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, sixteen different muscle groups of the body. The idea is to tense each muscle group hard (not so hard that you strain, however) for about 10 seconds, and then to let go of it suddenly. You then give yourself 15-20 seconds to relax, noticing how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to how it felt when tensed, before going on to the next group of muscles. You might also say to yourself "I am relaxing," "Letting go," "Let the tension flow away," or any other relaxing phrase during each relaxation period between successive muscle groups. Throughout the exercise, maintain your focus on your muscles. **When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you're working on: The guidelines below describe progressive muscle relaxation in detail:**

- Make sure you are in a setting that is quiet and comfortable. Observe the guidelines for practicing relaxation that were previously described.
- When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously without straining, for 7-10 seconds. You may want to count "one-thousand-one," "one-thousand-two," and so on, as a way of marking off seconds.
- Concentrate on what is happening. Feel the buildup of tension in each particular muscle group. It is often helpful to visualize the particular muscle group being tensed.



- When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15-20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
- Allow all the *other* muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.
- Tense and relax each muscle group once. But if a particular area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times, waiting about 20 seconds between each cycle.

**Once you are comfortably supported in a quiet place, follow the detailed instructions below:**

1. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7-10 seconds and then release for 15-20 seconds.  
*Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle" with both arms. Hold... and then relax.
4. Tighten your *triceps*--the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms--by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around them.
7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly. Imagine any excess tension in your chest flowing away with the exhalation.

13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (You should omit this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles smoothing out and relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold ... and then relax.
18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20-30 minutes the first time. With practice you may decrease the time needed to 15-20 minutes. You might want to record the above exercises on an audio cassette to expedite your early practice sessions. Or you may wish to obtain a professionally made tape of the progressive muscle-relaxation exercise. Some people always prefer to use a tape, while others have the exercises so well learned after a few weeks of practice that they prefer doing them from memory.

"An anxious mind cannot exist in a relaxed body."

Dr Edmund Jacobson

