

## Benefits of relaxation for athletes:

- Reduces mental and physical anxiety
- Reduces acute stress
- Increases concentration
- Increases receptiveness
- Improves performance
- Lowers arousal levels
- Counteracts the tendency to tense up when faced with confrontation or difficulty.
- Revitalises an athlete

## What is relaxation?

Relaxation helps an athlete feel calmer and produce a more relaxed performance. The techniques can be particularly helpful for athletes to calm themselves before competition to decrease anxiety. Some athletes also use relaxation techniques mid competition to lower arousal and help them stay focused.

Relaxation must be learnt as a specific skill and must be practiced so that it becomes a natural response.

There are a number of relaxation techniques. Athletes will often need to try a few until they see which one is most effective for them.

## Getting started...

Practice for 15-20 minutes a day.

Lie or sit down somewhere quiet and free from distractions in a comfortable position.

Ensure your head and arms are supported and your arms and legs are uncrossed.

Loosen tight clothing, remove shoes or trainers, breath regularly.

Have a passive attitude, don't force anything, don't think about how well you are doing.

Notice when your mind wanders bring it back to the exercises.

Focus on feeling relaxed, warm, calm and heavy.

## Quick Breath Control (Within-competition)

- Inhale slowly through your nose, drawing air deep into your lungs. Hold your breath for 5 seconds before releasing slowly.
- With each exhalation imagine you are removing the stress, fatigue or pressure from your body that may stand in the way of achieving your best performance. Focus only on each breath, blocking out everything around you. Repeat 10 times. As you inhale think 'energy in.' As you exhale think 'fatigue out'.
- The slow and deliberate inhalation-exhalation sequence will help you keep composure and control over any anxiety during stressful times and will give a quick mental break from the competition pressure.

## Deep Breath Control (Pre-competition)

Imagine your lungs are split into three levels:

1. Take a deep, complete breath and initially focus on filling the lower level of the lungs with air, first by pushing down the diaphragm and forcing the abdomen out.
2. Next fill the middle portion of the lungs by expanding the chest cavity and raising the rib cage.
3. Finally fill the upper level of the lungs by raising the chest and shoulders slightly. Hold this breath for several seconds and exhale slowly by pulling the abdomen in and lowering the shoulders and chest.

To deepen the relaxation inhale to a count of 4 and exhale to a count of 8.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

- Lie or sit down. Raise your arms, hold them out in front of you, make a tight fist with each hand. Notice the tension as you do it. Hold this tension for 5 seconds and then let go halfway and hold for an additional 5 seconds. Let your hands relax completely. Notice the tension and discomfort flow out of your hands and feel the difference. Then focus on relaxing your hands completely for 10-15 seconds.
- Do the same for each muscle group in your body; your upper arms, toes, ankles, calves. When you get onto your legs raise them just off the ground and tense your thigh muscles. As you gradually let go feel your legs soften into the floor.
- Then move onto your stomach muscles, your chest and shoulder muscles, your back (by pushing your back as hard as you can into the floor) and then your neck muscles. Finally tense your jaw, after 5 seconds let the tension out halfway, hold for another 5 seconds and relax completely.
- As you do this exercise reflect on how relaxed and heavy the muscles are. Where you notice tension try letting it go by feeling how heavy the muscles can become. As you finish, count down from 5 and on 1 open your eyes and say to yourself 'I am refreshed, alert and relaxed.'