



Exercises of awareness

Indra Majore Dūšele

Introduction

This set of exercises was made in order to propose the tools which would help to develop the emotional self-regulation skills and manage the everyday strain and tension. To make this possible, we need the skill to recognize (thus, to become aware of) what is going on with us at the particular moment in time, and to react skilfully and in accordance with the situation, so that we would manage our emotions and the situation in question in the most balanced way possible.

In the exercises proposed here, relaxation, visualisation and awareness practice principles are used. What they have in common is their relaxing effect on the autonomic nervous system – helping the different organ systems and energy renew after stress, activating the release of the wellness hormone – endorphin, lowering blood pressure and slowing down the heart rate.

The aim of the exercises is reached if they are practised regularly, because only practice helps to develop the following skills:

- notice and observe the stress signs in one's body, emotions and mind;
- use one's breathing to help oneself calm down;
- use one's imagination in order to relax and have a rest;
- guide one's attention (by keeping or switching it) in order to do the self-regulatory exercises without turning the attention away.

In order to develop skills, it is necessary to have intrinsic motivation and discipline, as well as favourable support and encouragement to proceed with what you have started. May you be motivated by the awareness that these exercises could reflect the dignified care of your own physical and mental health and an opportunity to maintain a clear mind!

In order to manage the conditions of emotional strain, the techniques of stress regulation are consciously usable tools both for decreasing the stress level and promoting emotional balance. Different techniques can be used in stress regulation, including relaxation, visualisation, and mindfulness practice. The purpose of these techniques is to decrease the activity of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which ensures the involvement of all organ systems, changing the heart rate and breathing patterns, muscle tension, the activity of digestive system etc. The organ systems mentioned above are/are not stimulated depending on whether the sympathetic or parasympathetic part of the ANS is activated. Decreasing the activity of the ANS, the parasympathetic (PSNS) part is stimulated, which is responsible for the regeneration of the organ systems and energy after the strain, activates digestion and release of endorphins, decreases the heart rate, lowers the blood pressure and body temperature¹.

Relaxation takes place while purposefully breathing and gradually decreasing the tension in the muscles. Upon relaxation, the PSNS is activated, and it allows to gradually tune the body and mind into the state of inner peace and well-being. In order to achieve relaxation and well-being, the deep breathing, balancing the heart's rhythm, and progressive muscle relaxation is used most often².

¹ Majore-Dūšele, I., Regzdiņa L. (2019). Stresa regulācijas metodes. No: Mārtinsones K. un Sudrabas V., red. *Veselības psiholoģija. Teorijas un prakses starpdisciplinārā perspektīva*. Rīga: RSU, 193.– 203.lpp.

² Hanson, R. (2009). *Buddha's brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love, and wisdom*. New Harbinger Publications.



Deep breathing is a deliberate and gradual slowdown of the breathing rhythm, making the exhalations slightly longer. As a result, within several minutes, the breathing rhythm becomes more stable, the inhalations and exhalations become deeper and slower, and relaxation is achieved. The gradual decrease in body tension involves focusing one's attention to different body parts in a sequential manner – from head to feet or vice versa, and a deliberately decreasing tension wherever one can notice it. Using these techniques is effective for lowering the anxiety level and psychological distress, as well as for improving the sleep quality³.

The central element of visualisation is the involvement of all senses in the moment of the imagined experience – to “see” what is visible, to “hear” the characteristic sounds, to “feel” the characteristic smells and tastes, and the feelings of touching and motion. Thus everything seen, heard and felt during the visualisation is embodied – experienced in such a way that the memories or the imagined scene is experienced in the present moment. The longer the attention is focused on the emotionally stimulating sensations, the more new neuron connections are made, which retain durable imprints in one's memory⁴. Using the visualisation along with other methods to decrease stress helps to develop self-awareness and relieve anxiety⁵.

One of the stress decrease methods widely used nowadays is mindfulness practice (also referred to as *mindfulness training*). This method is based on meditation principles and develops the skill of being present in the current moment with open and accepting attitude⁶.

The mindfulness practice was first proposed for the healthcare system by the American professor of medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn. In 1979, he created the first programme (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction), which was successfully applied to multiple patient groups with chronic diseases within the healthcare system⁷. By seeing mindfulness as the attention deliberately focused on the current experience, with an accepting, rather than critical attitude⁸, this program was widely researched while working with various groups of patients⁹. Overall, the programme was recognized to be efficient in decreasing the indices of anxiety, depression and psychological distress¹⁰, as well as in improving the quality of life and minimising exhaustion¹¹. As is confirmed by the systematic overview, the use of mindfulness practice considerably decreases the burnout risk for the healthcare and education professionals¹².

³ Khakha, D. C., Satapathy, S., & Dey, A. B. (2015). Impact of Jacobson progressive muscle relaxation (JPMR) and deep breathing exercises on anxiety, psychological distress and quality of sleep of hospitalized older adults. *Journal of Psychosocial Research*, 10(2), 211.

⁴ Hanson, R. (2009). *Buddha's brain: The practical neuroscience of happiness, love, and wisdom*. New Harbinger Publications.

⁵ Margolin, I., Pierce, J., & Wiley, A. (2011). Wellness through a creative lens: Mediation and visualization. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 30(3), 234-252.

⁶ Bite I., Majore-Dūšele I. (2016). Trešā viļņa kognitīvi bihevioreālā terapija. No Konsultēšanas un psihoterapijas teorija un prakse. Red. Bite I., Mārtinsone K., Sudraba V., Rīga: Zvaigzne ABC.

⁷ Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). Mindfulness-based stress reduction. *Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*, 467.

⁸ Kabat-Zinn, J., & Hanh, T. N. (2009). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. Delta.

⁹ Sanada, K., Alda Diez, M., Salas Valero, M., Pérez-Yus, M. C., Demarzo, M. M., Montero-Marín, J., ... & García-Campayo, J. (2017). Effects of mindfulness-based interventions on biomarkers in healthy and cancer populations: a systematic review. *BMC complementary and alternative medicine*, 17(1), 1-13.

¹⁰ Gotink, R. A., Chu, P., Busschbach, J. J., Benson, H., Fricchione, G. L., & Hunink, M. M. (2015).

Standardised mindfulness-based interventions in healthcare: an overview of systematic reviews and meta-analyses of RCTs. *PLoS one*, 10(4), e0124344.

¹¹ Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of psychosomatic research*, 57(1), 35-43.

¹² Luken, M., & Sammons, A. (2016). Systematic review of mindfulness practice for reducing job burnout. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 70(2).

The mindfulness practice is the attention guidance and emotion regulation training. People who train their attention can regulate their negative emotions, moods and stress more efficiently. Training one's attention amplifies positive emotions, which improve different attention characteristics and resources – attention expansion, flexibility and control. By training our attention we gain the flexibility necessary for shielding ourselves from negative information and take the path towards creative and alternative interpretations of the situation¹³.

¹³ Drigas, A., & Mitsea, E. (2021). Metacognition, Stress-Relaxation Balance & Related Hormones. *Int. J. Recent Contributions Eng. Sci. IT*, 9(1), 4-16.