

# How to Relax

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By Dr. Kevin B. Bucknall

Feeling nervous is normal and useful—you can use it to improve your motivation and get you studying when you might prefer to do something else. There are a lot of things in life that might seem more attractive! Excessive fear, on the other hand, is not helpful, especially if you blank out and forget what you have learned. It is valuable to learn how to relax, not only for exams but also for oral presentations or the job interviews to come. It can even help you to fall asleep at night.

I divide this article into two, first General Relaxation Techniques and, second, Relaxing in the Exam Room. It is easier to relax under exam conditions if you practice relaxation every day, if only for a few minutes. Your mind and body will get used to doing it and it will work better in the exam room. So I'll start by telling you different ways of relaxing (different techniques you can use). Give them a try! As with most things, practice may not make perfect but it sure as heck improves your performance. A daily relaxation session would do you the power of good.

## I General Relaxation Techniques

The best way would be for you to take one technique and try it on day one, a different technique on day two, a new way on day three, and so on. Then see which one works best for you. You can easily measure how effective each is in your case if you do two things: take your pulse and count your heartbeats before you start (write the answer down!) then take your pulse again after you have finished (write it down). When you compare the two you will find that the second number is below the first. If you do this for each technique and compare them all at the end, the one which lowered your heart rate the most is the best for you. If this all seems too much trouble to you, then just try them all out and do the one that you enjoy the most.

If you can sit cross-legged or in the lotus position in comfort for a period of time, that's great and you can do that while you relax. Otherwise it's fine to lie on a bed or you can lounge back in a comfortable armchair. Even that crummy exam room chair will do when that is your only option.

With all the techniques below, keep your eyes closed and start by consciously trying to relax, breathing slowly in and out for ten breaths, counting down from ten to zero. Oddly, it seems to work better if you do not stop at "one" but actually go down to "zero" when you count. Then start the relaxation technique.

### **Relaxation technique #1 : The Simple Breath Approach (my favourite!)**

Lie quietly on your back, arms by your side, palms up or down and with your fingers relaxed and slightly curled; or else in a comfortable chair with your arms on your thighs. Take your attention to your toes and breathe in slowly, picturing and feeling your breath flowing over your feet, up your legs and over the top of your body to your head; as you breathe out, picture and feel your breath running down your back all the way to your heels. Keep it up for as long as you like—maybe one or two minutes if in an exam room and short of time or up to thirty minutes or so if at home. Don't worry if you appear to fall asleep - you are relaxing very well indeed.

### **Relaxation technique #2: Bright In, Dark Out**

As you lie there, breathe slowly and picture the whole world around you as gleaming silvery white. When you breathe in the breath you take is bright and silvery; as you breathe out, black sludgy stuff pours from your skin and disappears into thin air. If you can identify any particular pain, discomfort, or weakness in any area of your body, imagine that the silvery breath is going into that target area and healing it or driving it away.

### **Relaxation technique #3: Imagining a Peaceful Rural Scene while breathing slowly and deeply**

You might be drifting in a boat on a lake, sauntering down a country lane, sitting in a glade in a forest, sprawled in a wood by a peaceful pond with ducks on it... whatever you think makes you feel good. Try to include sounds, like birds singing, the breeze in the trees, or water trickling, as this can help relaxation. Hold onto this calm, quiet picture and just enjoy.

### **Relaxation technique #4: Tackling the Offending Muscles Directly (I like this one too!)**

When you are tense, you will probably have tight muscles in the shoulders and in the face, especially around your jaw. Take your attention to your mouth and jaw then consciously slacken the muscles, letting your jaw sag and mouth open. Then focus on your neck and shoulders and let them droop, then move on to your fingers and toes. You can continue going round the rest of your body for even better results.

### **Relaxation technique #5 Tightening and Relaxing the Muscles**

Similar to #4, but here you first tighten up a muscle and hold it tense for perhaps five seconds then let go suddenly. It helps to wait as long again in order to let the muscle relax properly before moving on to the next one.

### **Relaxation technique # 6: The Count-Down**

Choose a number—try something between 10 and 20 if under pressure in the exam room, 50-100 if at home. Each breath in-and-out will count for one. Starting with 10 as an example, breathe in slowly, thinking of the number and visualising it in your head, and breathe out. Then change the number in your head to 9, then visualise yourself physically moving down to it as you breathe in and out. Continue in this way, counting down to zero where you stop. If you forget what number you are on it doesn't matter—just relax and go back to the last number you can remember. When at home and with larger numbers if you find that you do not get down as far as zero before going under (“zonking out” is a good phrase) you are doing well!

## **II Relaxing in the exam room**

Rush and panic will not help you at all. So first make sure you know which room the exam is actually in and ensure that you get to that room early. Have with you all the things that you will need. This probably includes a watch, two or three pens in different colours, a pencil, a bottle of white-out, some paper tissues, a calculator, a ruler, a bottle of water and some sweets to suck. It is your list so think if there is anything else you might want.

Unless you have been allocated a particular seat, get in early enough to sit where you will feel comfortable and be able to see the board in case messages might be written up.

Lay out the things you might need on the desk - grovelling around in bags can cause you tension and attract the unwanted attention of suspicious supervisors. Don't bother looking round the room, seeing who is there, who is late or absent. Forget the others. Only you matter now, and you are going to do well!

Check the time left before you are allowed to begin. If you got there early, you should have time to start your favourite relaxation technique, by now so familiar to you. Do it! It will help you to relax until they announce you can turn over your papers and start.

When that happens, if the idiot sitting next to you picks up a pen and starts frantically scribbling do not worry. They are not planning their answers properly, they will write bad stuff, and eventually get a poor mark. Do not let their foolish actions frighten you or make you feel tense. It is not quantity but quality of answers that gets good marks. A pile of rubbish remains a pile of rubbish, however long it took the person next to you to build.

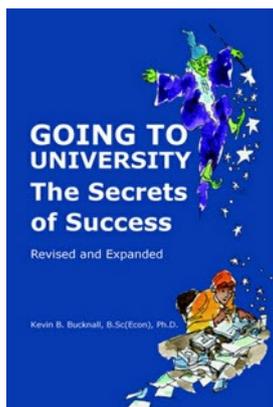
Similarly, if someone gets up and leaves the exam room don't fret! It is likely that they are ill-prepared, do not know enough, and so they have finished early. This is far more probable than that they are geniuses destined to get straight A's and later do superbly in life.

## Conclusion

When answering the questions, some teacher probably told you to put what you want to say in the Introduction, say it at length in the body of the answer, and then sum it up again in the Conclusion. So here goes.

- Learn to relax—it will help you combat stress in the exam room and life
- There are many techniques you can use—choose the one that works best for you
- Practise it each day if you can
- Use it in the exam room, before interviews and the like, and whenever you feel stressed out.

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The author's latest book is *Going to University: the Secrets of Success*, 2nd Revised and Expanded Edition, Kewei Press, UK, 2009. The recommended retail price is £9.95. An excerpt can be downloaded from [www.keweipress.com](http://www.keweipress.com). A Kindle version is now available, priced about £3.09 (inc. VAT), or in United States dollars around \$4.79. Details and links on the site below.

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