

# FACT SHEET:



# ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

**Category:**  
**Mental Health**

**Audience:**

**Person with an ABI;  
Family and Support  
Workers; and  
Professionals**

**For more information  
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## Relaxation after a Brain Injury

Following an acquired brain injury (ABI), many people find themselves more worried than usual, or being irritated by even the smallest things. People might tell you to “just relax”, but sometimes this is easier said than done.

Being anxious or stressed is a normal experience. However, if this is impacting on your relationships, and day to day tasks (e.g. house work, going out, sleep etc.) learning some relaxation techniques may be helpful. Learning how to relax is a skill, and can be very useful if you practice it. There are two key parts of effective relaxation. They are: deep breathing; and muscle relaxation.



### How do you know if you are anxious or stressed?

- Is your heart racing?
- Are you worried about lots of things?
- Are your muscles tense?
- Is your breathing fast or shallow?
- Do you feel jumpy or on edge?
- Are your palms sweaty?
- Do you have butterflies in your stomach

Answering YES to any or all of these questions is an indication that you may be experiencing a level of anxiety or stress.

### Controlling your Breathing

We breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. The body needs a balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide to run efficiently. When we are anxious, we take short shallow breaths and this balance is disrupted. This can lead to feeling dizzy, light-headed, confused, breathless, tingly, and have cold clammy hands. The normal rate of breathing is 10-14 breaths per minute. What's your breathing rate?

Gaining control over your breathing involves slowing your rate of breathing and changing your breathing style. By practicing this, you can reduce the physical symptoms of anxiety and stress.

## Breathing to Relax

Try to practice this technique once or twice a day, at a time when you are free from distraction and able to relax.

- Make sure you are sitting on a comfortable chair, or lying on a bed
- Breathe from your stomach rather than your chest. You can check this by placing one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. The hand on your stomach should rise when you breathe in.
- Loosen any tight clothing and take off shoes, jewellery, glasses, etc.
- Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside the concerns of the day.



### Lets Practice a Breathing Technique

- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the 'bottom' of your lungs – send the air down into your lungs as low or as deeply as you can.
- When you've taken a full breath, pause for a moment.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth. Be sure to exhale fully, allowing your body to go loose.
- It can help to count in for 4 and out for 4 counts (increase this with practice).
- Keep your breathing *slow* and *regular*, without gulping in a big breath or letting your breath out all at once.
- Now repeat this so that you do a "set" of 10 slow, full abdominal breaths. You may need to build up to 10 breaths over a few days.
- Five full minutes of this breathing exercise will have a strong effect in reducing anxiety.

## Muscle Relaxation

One of the body's reactions to stress and anxiety is muscle tension. You might feel aches and pains in your muscles, or just general tension. Sometimes we don't even notice muscle tension until we have a headache or are exhausted at the end of a day. When your muscles are relaxed, you will feel calmer overall.

### When Practicing Muscle Relaxation remember these things:

- Give yourself permission to relax
- Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about any possible physical limitations
- Try to be in a quiet, safe, comfortable environment
- Relaxing involves consciously tensing and then relaxing each muscle group (see over page)
- Make sure you can feel tension, but not pain. Keep the muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds and then RELAX.
- When relaxing each particular muscle group, it may be helpful to say something like "relax" or "calm" as you relax the muscle. Focus on the feelings in your body when you let go of the tension.



### Practice!

Only through practising can you become more aware of your muscles, how they respond with tension, and how you can relax them. Training your body to respond differently to stress is like any training – practising consistently is the key.

## Muscle Relaxation Sequence

	Part of Body	Tense – Keep muscle tensed for approximately 5 seconds	Relax
1	Right hand and forearm	Make a fist with your right hand	Relax
2	Right upper arm	Bring your right forearm up to your shoulder to “make a muscle”	Relax
3	Left hand and forearm	Tense	Relax
4	Left upper arm	Tense	Relax
5	Forehead	Raise your eyebrows as high as they will go, as if you were surprised by something	Relax
6	Eyes and cheeks	Squeeze your eyes tightly shut	Relax
7	Mouth and jaw	Open your mouth as wide as you can, as if you are yawning	Relax
8	Neck	Be careful as you tense these muscles. Face forward and then pull your head back slowly, like you are looking up to the ceiling	Relax
9	Shoulders	Tense your shoulder muscles as you bring your shoulders up towards your ears	Relax
10	Shoulder blades and back	Push your shoulder blades together, so that your chest is pushed forward	Relax
11	Chest and stomach	Breathe in deeply, filling up your lungs with air	Relax
12	Hips and buttocks	Squeeze your buttock muscles tightly	Relax
13	Right upper leg	Tighten your right thigh	Relax
14	Right lower leg	Do this slowly to avoid cramps. Pull your toes towards you, stretching the calf muscle	Relax
15	Right foot	Curl your toes downwards	Relax
16	Left upper leg	Tense	Relax
17	Left lower leg	Tense	Relax
18	Left foot	Tense	Relax

### Extra Resources

- Relaxation Centre of Queensland offers a wide variety of courses, events, and information. They have an extensive library of resources covering many areas including communication skills, relationships, relaxation, personal development and growth. Their website address is: <https://www.relaxationcentreqld.org/>
- There are a number of free audio relaxation exercises for download on the internet, or council libraries have a range of relaxation DVD's/CDs for borrowing.
- Talk to your case manager, psychologist or rehabilitation professional for suggestions and resources to find the best way for you to relax.