

The path to

It is well known that relaxation can bring a wealth of benefits. **Juliet Stephens** presents five top ways to relax

We live in a stress-filled world and are surrounded by physical, mental and emotional pressures. Taking steps to combat stress strengthens the coping mechanisms for dealing with everyday life and, particularly for people with arthritis, for managing pain.

Tension in the muscles around the body's joints decreases mobility, increasing pain and often frustration. Relaxation brings with it immediate health rewards: your breathing deepens and slows (allowing more oxygen to nourish the cells in your body), your blood flow increases, the body's healing system is activated and the heart rate (and blood pressure) is lowered. Plus the body's endorphins – its 'feel-good' chemicals and natural painkillers – are released into the system.

We all look for ways to escape from the unpleasant feelings of stress, and some are more productive than others. Different people will choose to relax in different ways – the point is finding which is most effective for you.

Doris Cluett, who has osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, says: 'I try to make specific time for relaxation once a day. Life is for living, and I will not let pain be the master of me. Sometimes it can be so hard to relax because I'm coiled up like a tight spring, and I have to actively think "get over this, let go of the tension" before I can start trying to unwind.'

Relaxation in any form helps the self-management of pain according to rheumatologist Dr Jane Griffin. 'In its simplest form, this can be watching a good film or reading a book, but in its more proactive forms, this can involve practising yoga or meditation, swimming in warm water, or going to the park and enjoying the flowers. All the time that you are

relaxing, your muscles will be less tense and you will have less pain,' she says.

Ideally you should practise some form of relaxation daily, for about 15 minutes. Relaxation is often just about spending time away from the hurly burly, which is surprisingly hard. Here are five simple ways to relax...

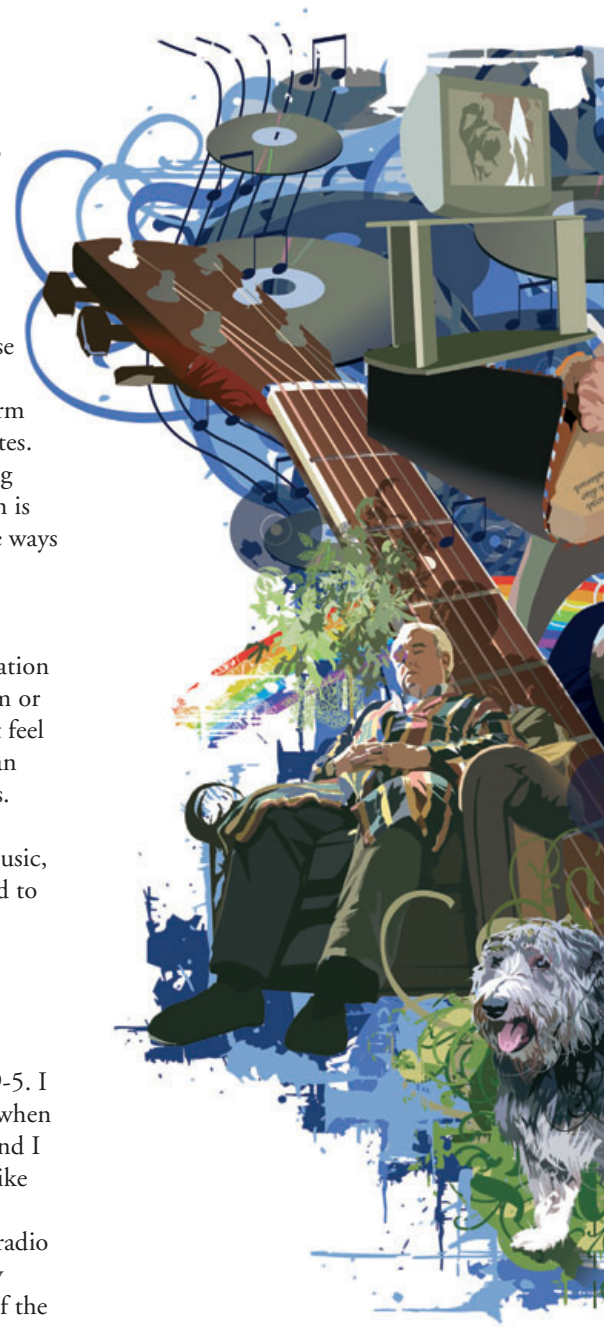
1 ME TIME

When you live with pain, relaxation often takes the form of escapism or distraction. You absolutely should not feel guilty about enjoying 'me time'. It is an opportunity to recharge your batteries. Whatever your pleasure is – reading, painting, watching TV, listening to music, or meeting up with friends – it is good to spend time enjoying yourself. Sheilah Watson, who has osteoarthritis, fibromyalgia and cervical spondylosis, realises the value of incorporating 'me time' into her daily routine. 'I try to structure my day as if I'm working a 9-5. I know when my relaxation time is, so when I sit down in front of the TV to unwind I know that I've earned it,' she says. 'I like having a glass of red wine while I'm cooking, or listening to my favourite radio programmes. I also find writing in my journal a relaxing process at the end of the day, as it gives me a chance to reflect. I've learned a lot about myself from doing this.'

2 MUSIC

Music appeals to our very basic rhythms, and can invigorate or relax you. As an ex-music teacher, Hubert de Camillis, who has osteoarthritis, knows the benefits of music. 'A lot of music is based around the basic rhythm of the heartbeat – approximately 60 bpm (beats per minute) or 120 bpm for double-time,' he says. 'Listening to slower, gentler music

can help slow the heartbeat and help you to relax. It can also be a great distraction – with jazz I feel like I'm going on a journey.' Sally Watt has had juvenile idiopathic arthritis since she was six years old. Now 26, Sally is a musician, 'I'm a bit of a rocker, but I do also love chilling out with soul or jazz music. I also like to relax with the score of a piece of music I have to learn. It's like reading – it can take me away into another world.'



relaxation

Illustration: James Greenway



will produce great benefits. Pauline Westcott, who has ankylosing spondylosis, loves taking her dog for walks. 'You have to get out in the fresh air, it lifts the spirits, and even if you need a canine companion to drag you out it gives you a great sense of achievement. Some days I can walk further than others, but staying in all day can really lead to despair,' she says.

Eileen Francis, who has rheumatoid arthritis and is a training volunteer for Arthritis Care's self-management programme, Challenging Arthritis, practises Jacobsen relaxation techniques (also known as progressive muscle relaxation) every morning. 'Before I get out of bed, I'll spend 15 minutes going through all the muscles in my body from my feet to my head, tensing and holding for a few seconds then relaxing the muscles. It's amazing how much tension builds up in the body, but the benefits of daily practice are enormous.'

4 BREATHING EXERCISES/MEDITATION

Breathing deeper and slower naturally causes us to relax. Breathing with the specific goal of relaxation is easy. Try this simple exercise. Make sure the phone is turned off and that you are sitting comfortably on a chair, or lying flat on the floor/bed.

If you are sitting in a chair, keep your arms relaxed by your sides or put your hands in your lap (palms can be facing up or down). Ensure your feet are flat on the floor, about shoulder width apart. You may need a cushion to support your back, which should be as straight as possible.

Try to relax your body completely and close your eyes. Place one hand just above your naval and the other on your chest. For maximum benefit, try to breathe deeply, inhale through the nose right down into your belly. Exhale slowly through the mouth. Focus your thoughts only on your breathing – the mind will wander, but when you notice that it has, return your focus to

the steady rhythm of the breath. Aim at first to calmly sit and breathe for just five minutes. It will take practice, but it will get easier and will bring great results.

Doris Cluett finds this very beneficial. 'I get myself into a comfortable position and think about relaxation. I focus on my breathing, and start counting each breath in my head. It's a bit like rowing a boat down a river, counting the strokes of the oars.'

Focusing on the breath is very important, and an example of 'mindfulness' – a word and concept with roots in Buddhist meditation. In essence it teaches awareness of the present moment, and trying to quieten the mind and the body. The brain is like an excitable child, always moving and whirring, which can overload us with stress. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MSBR) is a relatively new technique, but could be successful in reducing stress – a study at the American College of Rheumatology demonstrated a 35 per cent reduction in stress in people with rheumatoid arthritis after six months.

5 VISUAL IMAGERY

Vivid imagery involves creating and changing mental pictures to help relax and/or relieve pain. To reduce pain, imagine symbols that represent painful parts of the body, like a tight red band around the affected joint. Then imagine that band being loosened and falling away. Guided imagery is a similar technique, which involves imagining that you have been transported to another place or time. Doris finds this very calming: 'I think about things to take me to another place – it's a form of daydreaming.' You can imagine yourself on a beach with the sun on your skin or in a forest glade, with the sounds and smells of nature around you. Guided relaxation CDs, which narrate a journey transporting you away to somewhere peaceful are very popular. You can download a free audio track to sample or order a relaxation CD from Arthritis Care's website.

So, all that's left to do is to choose your favourite method of relaxation and put it into practice. After all, as they say, practice makes perfect. **an**

3 EXERCISE

Taking regular exercise is extremely important to increase mobility, and to maintain fitness and strength. Going to a local gym or swimming pool can also be a great social outlet, and any exercise will release the body's natural endorphins, which will make you feel great. The muscles and mind relax after exercise, which can mean improved sleep. You don't have to join a gym however – a simple walk in the park