

Centre for English Teaching Specialization

MOOC 4: Communication Skills for University Success

5.4c Relaxation & Focusing Techniques

Breathing

Control your breathing.

Controlled breathing is the most useful things you can master. It helps you to lower your stress levels because it lowers blood pressure and heart rate, helps to reduce levels of stress hormones in the blood, increases oxygen levels to balance out carbon dioxide and assists in relieving lactic acid build up in you muscles. Moreover, it makes you feel more calm and relaxed!

- Sit comfortably, with your shoulders back and your spine straight. Hunching over at a desk will compress your lungs & diaphragm, meaning you won't get enough oxygen into them and throughout your body.
- Breathe in through your nose & out through your mouth (or nose)
- Put one hand on your belly (below your ribs) and the other hand on your chest. When you breathe in, the hand on your belly should move, while the hand on your chest should stay still. This will enable your diaphragm to work better and get more oxygen into your blood.
- Breathe in for 4 counts & breathe out for 4 counts
- Breathe in for 4 counts, pause, breathe out for 4-6 counts, pause, breathe in for 4 counts...etc. (Note: only do what feels comfortable. You should never feel like you are out of breath or pushing yourself).

For stress during presentations

- Smile.
- Breathe.
- Focus on breathing to lower your heart rate. Take slow, controlled, deep breaths.
- Stand up straight. That means stand with your feet hip-width apart, knees very slightly bent, belly-button pulled into your spine, shoulders back and spine straight, head and neck stacked on top of each other (not leaning too far back or forward). Imagine there is an invisible piece of string pulling you up from the very top of your head, keeping your body standing in one straight line.
- Smile.
- Breathe.
- Remind yourself that you can do it, that you're confident and that you know your subject. Positive reinforcement is often very difficult to give to yourself (and can feel silly), but it *works*.
- *Act*. Pretend you're someone else – someone who is a confident public speaker and who isn't nervous.
- Smile.
- Breathe.

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If you need something more, try clean breathing:

Clean breathing is a useful technique for relaxing and focusing because it keeps your mind focused and occupied on breathing, distracting you from whatever is causing you stress. Moreover, it helps identify where you might be carrying tension or stress.

- Imagine that your breath is a cleansing agent. With each breath, picture it filling up your body, from the tips of our fingers and the crown of your head to the bottom of your heels and toes. Push it into all of the creases and sore joints. Imagine that it collects all of your stress, tension and any pain you're feeling.
- Breathe it out slowly so you don't lose any 'toxins' on the way. Do this until you have 'cleaned' all of your body.

Need a nap?

Studying is hard work, mentally and physically, and sometimes you will need to take a nap during the day.

When taking a nap, here are some pointers:

- Listen to white noise or soft, calming music through headphones to block out as many distractions as possible.
- Go to a dimly lit room or, alternatively, use an eye mask.
- 20 minutes is generally the optimal nap time (though it can be anywhere between 10 and 30, depending on your body).
 - Longer than this your risk going into deep sleep or REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which will leave you feeling worse when you wake up.
 - If you need a longer nap because you didn't get enough sleep, try for between 90minutes and 120minutes as this will be enough time for your body to go through one REM cycle.
 - There are phone and smartwatch apps out there that will track your REM sleep and wake you up at the best time (and can be used for sleeping, too).
- Have a cup of coffee *before* your nap, then nap for 20 minutes.
 - Napping gets rid of drowsiness
 - Your body takes 20 minutes to digest caffeine and for it to enter your blood stream.
 - Caffeine makes you more alert and focused.
- Eating an apple is often said to have a more immediate effect than drinking a cup of coffee. The fibre and other nutrients in the apple help to moderate the release of sugar (fructose), which increases your energy.
- Sugary snacks like lollies, candy and chocolate will give you an immediate high, but these will wear off quickly.
- Go for a walk instead, as this gets your blood flowing and will increase your energy more naturally.

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Still feeling tense?

This is a great exercise to do if you're struggling to get to sleep! Note: if you have any injuries, modify this exercise appropriately.

- Go somewhere quiet and dimly lit (or, alternatively, listen to soft music or noise through headphones and close your eyes)
- Lie on your back and get comfortable. (This can be done seated, if you are unable to lie down, but it works better if you're lying down).
- In the following order, clench your muscles, tensing each and every part for 5 seconds, and then relax. Don't stretch afterwards, just let the tension melt out and *remember to relax for 2-3 seconds after each group*.
 - Start with your feet, tensing everything from your toes to your heel as hard as you can.
 - Shins and knees
 - Thighs
 - Buttocks and pelvic floor
 - Stomach and lower back. Make sure you tense your lower stomach muscles as well!
 - Chest, squeezing out all the air in your lungs.
 - Hands. Try not to hurt yourself with your nails!
 - Arms
 - Shoulders
 - Neck
 - Face (eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, jaw, forehead)
 - Relax.
 - Now, clench every muscle in your body. Hold it for 3-5 seconds.
 - Relax
- Stay lying down, eyes closed, for a few minutes or until you fall asleep. If you need to move, start by wiggling your toes and fingers and then slowly bring your knees up, then push yourself up on your elbows, then hands, then feet. Take it slowly so you don't get dizzy by standing too quickly.