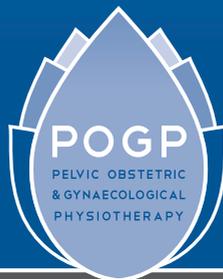


# The Mitchell Method of Physiological Relaxation

A simple technique  
suitable for all



EXCELLENCE  
MATTERS

# The Mitchell Method of Physiological Relaxation

The 'Mitchell Method' of physiological relaxation - often known as the 'simple method of relaxation'- is the name given to a technique of relaxing the whole, or parts of your body. Once learnt and practised, it can be used easily and anywhere to relax and reduce the muscle tension produced by stress.

Life is full of events and times that may cause us to feel stressed.

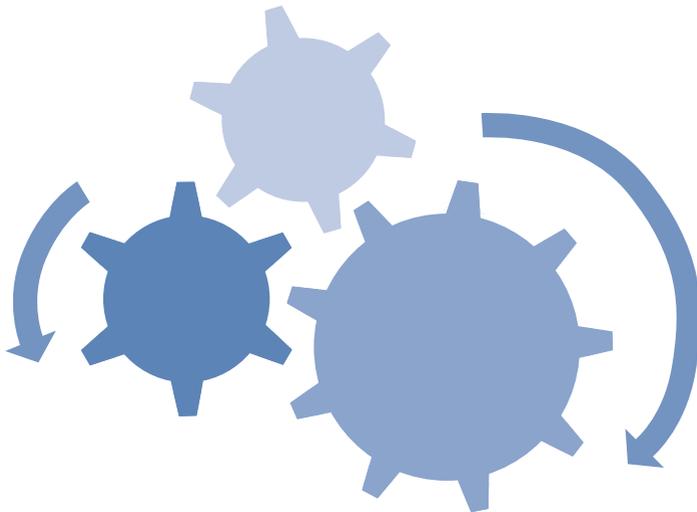
The 'fight or flight' response is how the body deals with stressful events; muscle tension is generated so that we are ready to run or fight.

Fear, frustration, pain, grief, anger or anxiety can trigger this pattern. Not only our muscles, but also our glandular and nervous systems get involved. We can end up feeling quite wound up.

Physical activity is known to reduce muscle tension and stress.

These days, we rarely need to fight or take flight, but do build up muscular stress as a response to events such as traffic, work, personal issues, financial problems and health concerns.

Stressful situations can affect anyone, some people more than others. It can be exhausting and harmful to our health. In some cases, it may even prove to be life-threatening.



## A tense person may be easily recognised by exhibiting some of the following behaviours:

- frowning
- tightness/clenching in the jaw and teeth grinding
- raised or hunched shoulders
- clenched hands and tightly crossed legs
- drawn in and closed posture
- a shallow or held breathing pattern

To relieve stress, we need to find the right level of muscle tension: enough for an active life, but not so much that our muscles are exhausted. It is important to be able to recognise any exhausting muscular tension, and then learn to be able to relax those muscles when we need to.

## The Mitchell Method is based on the following principles:

- Tightening or contracting muscles results in movement.
- Movement causes repositioning of the joints and limbs.
- When we are awake, the brain will register a change in body position through muscle, joint and skin sensation.
- The brain is only aware of the movement it causes. Movements are controlled by the nervous system; if one group of muscles is 'instructed' to tighten, the opposite group of muscles for that action receives an 'instruction' to relax.

We can learn to recognise and be aware of tense muscles and joints. Instructing or 'ordering' the opposite muscle groups to tighten will automatically result in 'relax' messages being received by the tense muscles and joints. This new 'position of ease' can be learnt by registering the feeling in the muscles, joints and skin. Finding the position of ease of all your joints will result in relaxation.

## How to use The Mitchell Method of Relaxation



Arrange yourself comfortably where your body is well supported.

A darkened room is not necessary, and it does not need to be completely quiet. If possible, the room should be comfortably warm.

Three exact orders are given to each area of your body; they never vary. They are all positive, easy to remember and work in any position:



1. Move away from the position of stress.
2. Stop.
3. Be aware of and feel the new position.

You will find the new 'position of ease' more pleasurable than the old position of stress, and with practice, it will be easier to achieve a greater level and speed of relaxation.

Memorize only the words in **bold type** and act on each instruction ('order').

Stop doing the activity.

Register/feel the changes in your body.

## Orders to the arms

Shoulders - **"Pull your shoulders towards your feet"** - away from the ears, making the neck longer.

### STOP

**Feel** that your shoulders are lower down, and that there is now a wider space between them and your ears.

Elbows - **"Elbows out and open"** - keep your arms supported, then push them slightly away from your sides, opening out the elbow joints.

### STOP

**Feel** the positions of your arms and elbows, and the pressure of your arms on their support, through the sensations of your skin.

Hands - **"Fingers and thumbs long and supported"** - open out your fingers and thumbs, keeping your wrists resting on their support.

### STOP

**Feel** your fingers and thumbs fall back onto their support. Don't let your hands touch each other or they will register this instead of their own position. Feel that the hands are still, the pads of the fingers touching their support. Be aware of your thumbs as they lie beside the fingers.

Nerves from the hands take up a large part of the conscious brain, where sensation is recognised, use this to feel ease; concentrate on the pleasure of feeling your resting hands.

## Orders to the legs

Hips - **"Turn your hips outwards"** - feel your thighs and legs roll outwards.

### STOP

**Feel** that your legs have rolled outwards.

Knees - **"Move your knees gently until comfortable"**.

### STOP

**Feel** the comfort in your knees.

Feet - **"Push your feet away from your face"** - bend the ankles downwards, gently pointing your toes.

## STOP

**Feel** that your feet are softer at the ankle joints because all the lower leg muscles are now relaxed.

## Orders to the body

**“Press your body into the support”** - using the floor, bed or back of chair - not the seat.

## STOP

**Feel** the pressure of your body on the support.

## Orders to the head

**“Press your head into the pillow or chair”** - feel the movement in your neck as you do this.

## STOP

**Feel** the weight of your head in the hollow you have made. As your brain registers that the head is supported, it relaxes all the neck muscles.

## Breathing orders

**“Take a deep breath”** - feel your tummy swell out as you breathe out **“then breathe out easily”** - repeat twice.

The ribs move in and out. Breathe at a natural rate.

## Orders to the face

Jaw - **“Drag your jaw down”** - do not open your mouth, just unclench your teeth inside your mouth and gently pull your jaw down.

## STOP

**Feel** the space between your upper and lower teeth, and that the skin over your cheeks is smooth with your lips still gently touching each other.

Tongue - **“Bring your tongue down and let it lie in the middle of your mouth”** - if it is stuck against the roof of your mouth.

## STOP

**Feel** the tip of your tongue touching your lower teeth.

Eyes - **“Close your eyes”** - if not already closed. Let your eyelids close down over your eyes, do not screw them shut.

## STOP

**Be aware** - of the darkness with your eyes at rest.

Forehead - **“Smooth the skin over your forehead from your eyebrows into your hair, continuing the movement over the top of your head and down the back of your neck”** - widen the space between your eyebrows and hairline, making it wrinkle free.

## STOP

**Feel** the smoothing of the skin of your forehead and your hair moving back as the large muscle of your skull slackens and relaxes.

You have now completed the whole sequence.

This can be repeated in the same order and the same way again and again. As you practise, you will learn the instructions, and what you expect to feel or be aware of in your body. Work though one body area at a time and joint by joint.

You will gradually develop a pleasant feeling of comfort through your body as the tension and stress ease. This is **relaxation**. You have been in complete control of this change.

To return to full activity after doing the Mitchell Method stretch your limbs in any direction. Try not to hurry: sit up or stand up slowly.

Practise total relaxation daily until you have mastered the changes. Once you feel confident, you can find positions and timings that work for you, and help you to find relaxation when you need it.

Sometimes your mind does not switch off, and it can be helpful to choose a particular, happy thought to occupy your mind; it might be a place, a holiday, a colour, etc. You can retrain your mind to be at rest too.

You may need to teach the Mitchell Method of simple relaxation to someone else (e.g an anxious child or elderly person who is tense and not able to help him or herself relax). Sit quietly beside or in front of the person, and gently help him or her to place his or her limbs into the positions of ease. Repeat the orders again and again in a soothing voice to allow the process to reach their conscious awareness without effort on their part.



Try this simple method in the following common situations of stress:

- In pregnancy and during labour and delivery, modifying your position as required (avoid prolonged lying on your back in the advanced stages of pregnancy)
- At work after a long day, lengthy meetings or too long in front of a screen
- While driving - try the shoulder, elbow, body, head and jaw instructions
- While travelling - particularly long journeys



Relaxation can be practised with success under many challenging situations. Try it. It may help you to feel less worn out and live a longer, more comfortable life.

This method can also be useful (alongside other methods of relaxation) for those individuals who have had diagnoses of painful bladder syndrome (PBS), interstitial cystitis (IC), anal pain, vaginismus, painful intercourse or other issues related to a high-tone pelvic floor.



## Suggested reading:

Mitchell L. (1990) Simple Relaxation: The Mitchell Method for Easing Tension, 2nd edn. John Murray, London.

## Suggested web links:

[patient.info/health/anxiety/features/relaxation-exercises](https://patient.info/health/anxiety/features/relaxation-exercises)

[www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/)

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/#.WzSvDCAna70](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/relaxation/#.WzSvDCAna70)

[www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm](https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm)

## Getting help

If you have any difficulty following the advice or exercises in this booklet, or find that your symptoms are not improving, ask to be referred, or if available, refer yourself to a physiotherapist with experience in treating women with pelvic and pelvic floor muscle problems. She will be able to assess you and offer specific treatments/alternatives that are suitable for your needs.

To find your nearest specialist physiotherapist, visit:  
[pogp.csp.org.uk](http://pogp.csp.org.uk)

Further advice and information booklets are also available from  
[pogp.csp.org.uk](http://pogp.csp.org.uk)



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