

REDUCING YOUR STRESS

By: Victor Aguirre
LYNAUGH UNIT

Stress is a serious issue. It is literally a life and death situation. I never believed it could have such a devastating impact on your mental and physical well-being until recently when I suffered a serious panic attack.

I was laying on my bunk reading a book when all of a sudden I felt a rush of adrenaline course through my body for no apparent reason. My heart was beating hard on my chest, my face became pale, and my vision blurred. I thought I was having a heart attack. After I told a guard that something was wrong with me, I was taken to the infirmary and from there taken to a hospital nearby. At the hospital, after all the blood work was done, I was told by the doctor that what I was experiencing was a severe case of anxiety (in the form of a "panic attack") due to accumulated stress. This diagnosis scared me because it was the first time I had personally experienced the mental and physical manifestations of stress this way. It was a horrifying experience.

Because of this episode, I bought some books on anxiety disorders and stress so I could understand what was happening to me. Through them I learned a few techniques that I would like to share with you because this place is a breeding ground for stress and I have noticed that a lot of guys here are experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression without knowing what is happening to them. We can all agree that knowing is better than not knowing and the techniques I am about to describe are meant to educate you on ways to reduce your stress and let you experience the difference they will make on your mental and physical health. I can personally vouch for these techniques because I have been doing them for close to a year and I have felt more relaxed and more at peace because of it.

A. BREATHING

The simplest way to begin reducing stress is to learn to breathe properly. This simple technique works because when you take deep breaths you are doing something that works on a physiological level. In other words, it does something that is good

for your body and mind; like giving you more oxygen (good for you) and releasing carbon dioxide (bad for you) from your body; lowering your heart rate; lowering your blood pressure, etc. This is why the most basic advice you receive when you are getting angry or frustrated at a situation is to "take a deep breath and count to ten." It really does work.

To begin your breathing practice, set aside a few minutes each day to concentrate on taking deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose, slowly, until your lungs are completely full. As you are breathing in, your stomach should rise and expand. Then slowly breathe out through your mouth until your lungs are empty. Take 20 deep breaths per session. The more you do it, the easier it will become to do it naturally without having to stop to remind yourself to "take a deep breath." This simple technique is a tried and true way to begin reducing your stress levels.

B. PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a technique prescribed by doctors, therapists and psychiatrist when dealing with anxious and depressed patients because it is very effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and other disorders (depression, etc.).

This is how the technique works:

- *Find a quiet place, like your cell or cubicle, where you can get away from all distractions.
- *Lay down on a flat surface with your eyes closed and hands folded over your torso and take 20 deep breaths as described in the section above.
- *Now squeeze your hands into a tight fist and hold them for 10 counts. Release the hold and, feeling the relief on your hands, count to 20. "One, Relax. Two, Relax..." (It is important that you repeat the word "relax" or any other word that makes you feel peaceful because they are affirmations to your mind and your mind puts these words into physiological action without your awareness).
- *Tighten your biceps as if you are showing off your muscles. Count to 10. Release the hold. Count to 20, "One, Relax. Two, Relax....."
- *Following the same process, holding tight for 10 counts, releasing and counting to

20, go through these body parts:

- *Your forehead. Push your eyebrows up as if you are trying to make them touch the top of your hairline. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Your eyes. Hold them shut as tight as you can. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Your mouth. Open as wide as you can. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Now sit up, Indian style, your eyes still closed. Pull your head back as far as you can, as if you were trying to make it touch your back. Hold for 10. Release, count 20.
- *Your shoulders. Pull them up as if saying "I don't know", squeeze. Hold for 10, Release, count to 20.
- *Pull your shoulders back as if you were squeezing something in the middle of your back. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Lay back down flat on your back, eyes still closed. Squeeze your stomach as if you were doing a crunch. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Bend your knees and, with your feet planted, raise your hips off the mat. Feel the squeeze on your lower back. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Pull your feet back flat. Squeeze your thighs as tight as you can. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Your calves. Pull your toes towards you, feel your calves stretch and tighten. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.
- *Your toes. Point your toes away from you. Hold for 10. Release, count to 20.

This whole process takes approximately 18-25 minutes to do. Try to do this every day of the week for maximum benefits. I have to be honest, when I first read about these exercises I thought they were silly and would be a waste of time. However, I was in severe distress due to my anxiety and had no choice but to try them...or take medication. I am glad I was brave enough to try them. I have not had another bout of anxiety and I feel more relaxed and more at peace. I have been in prison for 21 years and wish I could have learned these simple techniques earlier. That is why I write this article, hoping that it will help someone going through what I was

going through or help someone prevent it in the future.

I will close by asking you to take stress seriously and take the steps necessary to reduce it and release it from your body. Your life and your sanity may depend on it. These techniques are not exclusive, either. There are other ways of reducing and releasing stress: exercise (weightlifting or other resistance training); meditation; and eating properly and healthy. But I shared the techniques that have worked for me along with exercise, meditation and eating properly.

I hope these words help you on your way to a more peaceful, healthy and fulfilling life.
