

The Mental Game - Relaxation

Many players have told me that they have trouble sleeping after playing bridge, particularly when they play at night, because their mind keeps re-playing the hands, a bid they made or didn't make, or a signal from partner they missed. This concern is not uncommon to athletes who may struggle to sleep properly on the night before a match due to pre-match excitement. Learning how to relax the body and clear the mind in order to get a decent night's sleep, particularly in a multi-day competition, is a skill that can be learnt just like any other skill associated with playing bridge. However more importantly, developing the ability to relax can help you reduce anxiety in a match simply by taking a couple of deep breaths - a skill that athletes use in competition to great effect. Relaxation is also used as a preparatory step for mental rehearsal which I will cover in my next article.

There are many different relaxation methodologies available such as progressive relaxation, breathing techniques, meditation and so on. Everyone has their own preferred method. The technique that I liked to use when I was competing, and which is widely used at high level sport, is known as autogenic training. A methodology for this process, which is too long to reprint here, can be found at <http://www.guidetopsychology.com/autogen.htm>; or you can email me at kim.frazer@bigond.com and I will send you a script. Over 3,000 clinical studies have shown Autogenics, which originated in Germany in 1932 by Dr Johannes Schultz, to be effective in many areas including:

- enhancing performance;
- assisting memory and focus;
- inducing a feeling of well being and confidence;
- improving the quality of sleep

It takes at least 2 - 3 months to become accustomed to the autogenic training technique, but spending 15 minutes on this every night until it becomes second nature will assist you in the long run. For those of you who want something simpler that you can start straight away, I have outlined below a simple relaxation technique to use.

The following script can be put on to a tape or learnt and then followed (proceed slowly allowing at least five to ten minutes for the relaxation exercise).

Settle yourself into a comfortable seated position; adjust your posture so that the chair is completely supporting your weight. Close your eyes and begin by taking three long, slow breaths, focusing on the feeling of relaxation each time as you breathe out. Notice with each breath that you take that there is a moment of relief with the exhalation of each breath.

Continue to breathe slowly, enjoying the feeling of relaxation and as you do try to associate that pleasant feeling with an increasing heaviness in each muscle group within your body.

Let that feeling begin in the muscles around your forehead and face and then let it spread very slowly down through your neck and shoulders (continue the spread of relaxation taking at least two minutes to spread it down through your whole body).

When you have relaxed each and every muscle group within your body take two more deep breaths and then enjoy the feeling of relaxation.

When you wish to "re-awaken" count slowly backwards from 5 to 1 stretching your muscles as you do so. You will then feel refreshed and rested." (Naturally you will skip this step if you are doing this at night in bed and want to fall asleep).

It takes a little time for your body to learn to respond to the relaxation procedure to the point where you can relax quickly, but with daily practice you will eventually be able to achieve a level of relaxation by simply taking a few deep breaths. Relaxation techniques such as this can be combined immediately with mental rehearsal so that 5-10 mins is spent on relaxation followed by 10-20 mins for the rehearsal and I will cover this topic in my next article.

For more information on this topic, Google "autogenic training sport psychology" or "relaxation training" on the internet.