

# Fear of falling

## Understand it, beat it

Camden **NHS**  
Primary Care Trust



“The best way to never fall is to never get up from your chair”

...but it wouldn't be much of a life!



## About this information booklet

**Many of us will, at some time, have a fear of falling.**

For example, experiencing slipping on ice on a winter's day can leave us feeling shaky. As a result we may walk cautiously for a while afterwards, and it may take some time to return to our normal self.

This is quite normal and understandable – it makes sense to be careful. But a more ongoing, lasting fear of falling can cause problems, by stopping us enjoying life to the full.

Living with a fear of falling can create a lot of worry to family members, friends and ourselves resulting in a lot of distress.

A fear of falling can also lead to us dropping out of activities we like to do and staying at home more. This can result in a loss of confidence and feelings of boredom, frustration and loneliness.

**This information booklet is for anyone who has a fear of falling, his or her relatives and friends.**



The booklet looks at:

- The emotional effects of having a fear of falling
- What does it feel like to be anxious?
- How can anxiety affect how you walk?
- How can you help yourself?

## The emotional effects of having a fear of falling

We may feel out of control of our body and our situation generally. Therefore we may feel that there is nothing that we can do.

We feel lonely and isolated from family and friends. Sometimes it can be difficult to talk about how we feel with those close to us. We may not want to worry or upset them.



## What does it feel like to be anxious?

For some a fear of falling can be overwhelming. For example, it can make us very anxious and it can stop us from doing the things we need to do in our daily lives.

There are **three parts** to the feeling of anxiety:

### 1) Physical Body sensations include:

- Shaky Legs
- Irregular Breathing
- Churning Stomach
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Racing Heart

All of these symptoms are very unpleasant. However, they are not physically harmful or damaging in any way – it's our body's instinctive way of reacting when we think we are in danger.

## 2) Mental Anxiety

- Constant worrying thoughts, often about the fear of falling.
- Fearing the worst – *"I will not be able to get up if I fall"*.
- When we are anxious we tend to focus on negative things rather than positive things. For example, *"I can feel my legs are wobbly; I can't be safe walking"* rather than *"I'm walking, I've not fallen, I'm getting there!"*

These thoughts can make the anxiety worse and may even trigger it!

## 3) Avoidance Behaviour

- We may take some specific action to make ourselves feel safer e.g. If we fear we will fall we may sit down; if we feel we may collapse, we may hold on to something and so on. These are known as safety behaviours.
- We may avoid similar situations in the future.
- We may only walk with others, which in turn will only maintain our fear of falling – as we never get the chance to learn what we can do.

## A vicious circle can result:

We get confidence by doing things.

**AVOIDANCE** means stopping doing things and leads to **LOSS OF CONFIDENCE**

Loss of confidence means **ANXIETY** and can bring about feelings of failure

Avoidance can spread to **MORE and MORE** situations



## How can something like anxiety affect how I walk?

### Fear of falling as a risk factor for future falls

Fear of falling can have an immediate effect – making us shaky and distracted, but it can also have a longer-term effect.

We are distracted from walking by negative thoughts: *“If I fall, I will not get up, I will be alone, no-one will be able to help me,”* therefore reducing our attention and ability to complete the task in hand.

The physical effects of anxiety such as increased muscle tension may make it harder to walk easily and naturally.

If we avoid activity we get unfit and out of shape, which can also make walking harder adding to our anxious thoughts that walking is difficult.

Everyday tasks become more daunting – so we get more anxious and more distracted by anxiety.

## How can you help yourself?

### A Step-by-Step Guide

There might be lots of very good reasons why you have worried about falling.

Your doctor, nurse, or therapist can help and advise you.

However, the physical and mental effects of anxiety can add to the problem, so by tackling the anxiety you may well find that walking becomes easier and you rediscover your confidence.

### Dealing with Physical Anxiety

When we are anxious we often over-breathe – taking a few slow, deep breaths can calm you down.

Practice the relaxation exercise at the end of this booklet everyday, so that if you do get panicky, you have the skills to control it. Anxiety can also make you tense and relaxation can help with this.



## Dealing with Mental Anxiety

When we are anxious we tend to notice the bad things and ignore or dismiss the good things.

Try to think of positive, encouraging things, to help you feel more rather than less confident.



## Dealing with Avoidance

Try not to avoid walking. If a long walk seems too daunting, set yourself a smaller goal – one you aren't too afraid to try.

Even walking a few steps across the room is a good start to getting your confidence back.



## 1. Getting ready

**Don't rush! Get up when you feel ready**

Remember to think about your breathing and try to relax.

*"I can only do one step at a time, I'll concentrate on one step, then move on to the next step."*

*"What is it I have to do right now?"*

*"I can do this, I have in the past."*

*"I'll probably look back afterwards, and think what was I worrying about."*

## 2. Walking

*"What do I need to do first, what do I need to do next?"*

*"Don't think about other things, that's not relevant, I'm doing alright as I am."*

*"One step at a time!"*

*"Never mind what others might be thinking, it's not relevant."*

If you feel tense, shaky or panicky, stop and take a few slow, deep breaths. Tell yourself that the unpleasant feelings are only anxiety, and will pass in time.

**Don't rush! Go at your pace. If you're with someone, explain that you'll walk better at your own pace.**



### 3. After

Make sure you remind yourself of your achievements:

*"I did it!"*

*"It wasn't that bad after all, I made it."*

*"I felt uncomfortable, but I coped."*

Even if it wasn't perfect, you still did it.

**Congratulate yourself – give yourself a treat, anything!**

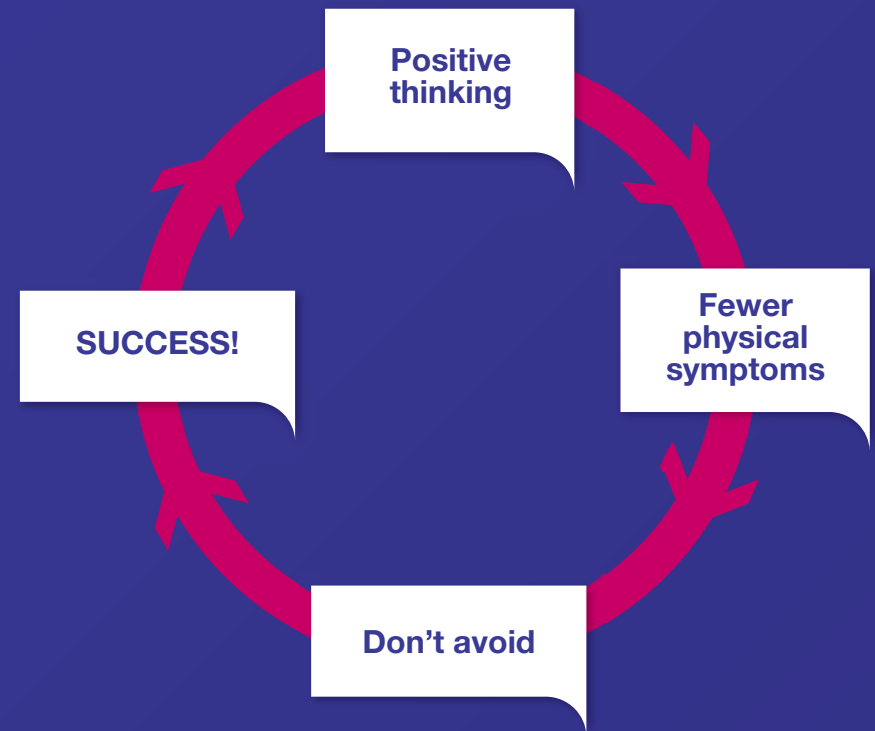
### 4. Next step – preparing for next time

Now you have proof of what you can do. Deal with mental anxiety by reminding yourself of this:

*"It's just negative thoughts. That's the problem. When I control them I can control the fear of falling!"*

*"Next time, it won't be as bad."*

**Build on your successes!**  
Once you are fairly confident, extend your goals – try going a little further.



*"I can stop the fear of falling happening again. It's not easy, but I can do it, by working on it, I can break the cycle of anxiety".*

## ‘The best way to never fall is to never get up from your chair’ .... but it wouldn’t be much of a life!

We can’t promise that you will never fall again but getting the right help from professionals, and using this booklet to help yourself overcome your fears, should make you more confident.

**If you do have another fall, try to put it down to experience:**

- Were you rushing?
- Did you have the right walking aid?
- Was it something beyond your control, like a slippery floor?
- Try to think positively, rather than let yourself slip back into a vicious circle of worry and avoidance.

- Think of all the times that you **haven’t** fallen.
- Think about how you successfully regained your confidence before – you’ve done it before, so you can do it again.
- Try not to avoid walking.
- Use the following **relaxation techniques** to cope with any physical anxiety





## Relaxation techniques

When we are anxious, the muscles in our bodies tense. When muscles become too tense, we experience uncomfortable sensations such as:

*Headache*  
*Stiff neck*  
*Painful shoulders*  
*Tight chest and difficulty in breathing*  
*Trembling*  
*Racing heart*  
*Churning stomach*  
*Tingling in hands and face*  
*Back pain, and so on*

- In turn, these sensations can make us even more anxious and tense.

- The most effective way of controlling bodily tension is by relaxing.
- By relaxing we don't mean sitting in front of the TV or having a hobby (although these recreations are important too), we mean developing a skill to reduce unnecessary physical tension.
- This then helps to relieve anxiety and the unpleasant bodily sensations. When our bodies are free of tension, our minds tend to be relaxed.

**However, the ability to relax is not always something which comes naturally. It is a skill, which has to be learned.**

The following exercises are designed to help you to learn to relax. When you are able to relax using the first exercise, you can begin to shorten the routine.

This should be done gradually until you are able to relax at will.



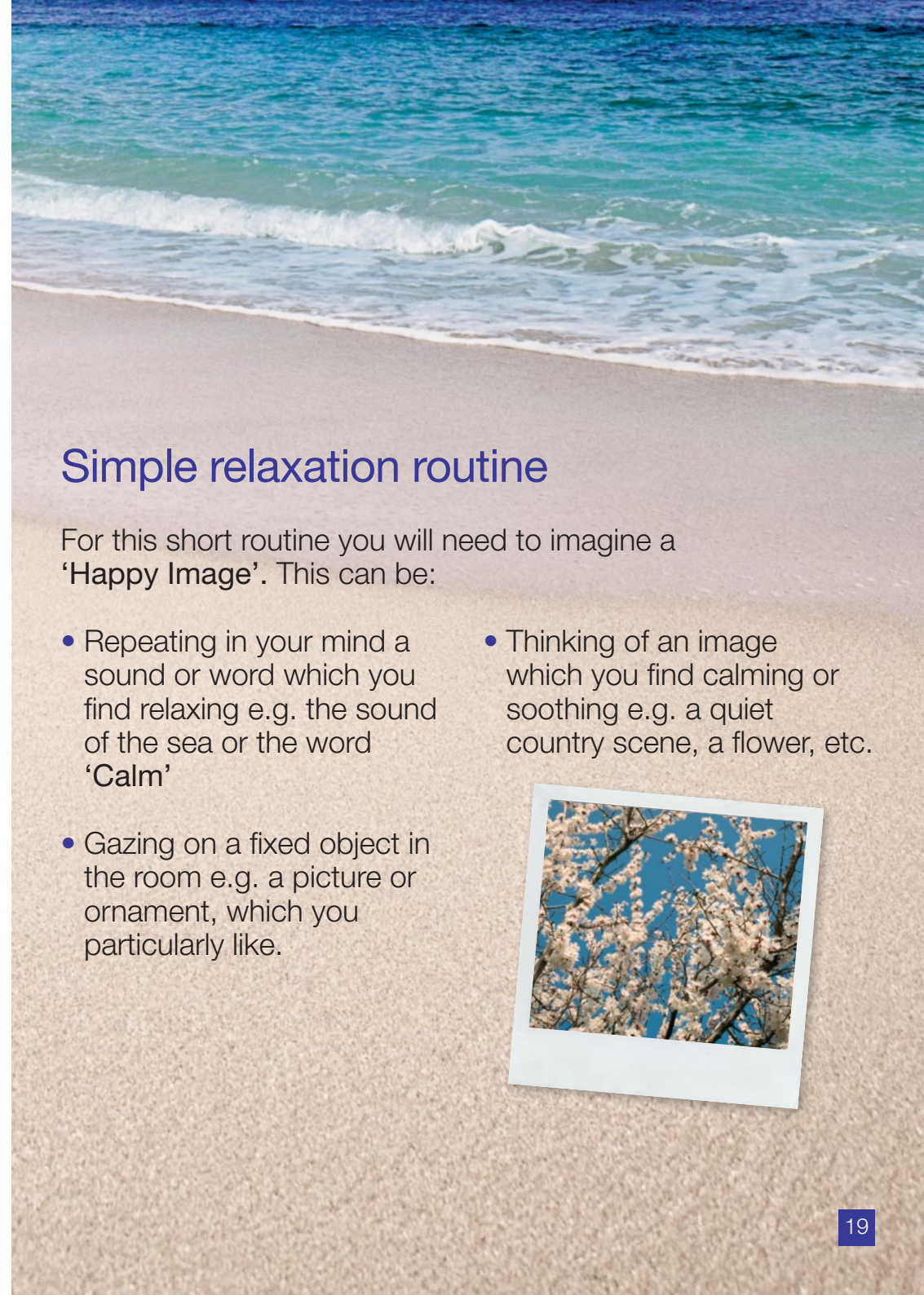
## General guidelines

### Relaxation

- In advance, try to decide when you are going to practice; it is helpful to develop a routine, which you can stick to.
- Make sure that you choose somewhere quiet to practice, and make sure that no one will disturb you during your practice.
- Don't attempt your exercise if you are hungry or have just eaten; or if the room is too hot or too chilly.
- Start the exercise by lying down in a comfortable position; later you can also practice in other positions, such as in a comfortable chair.

### Breathing

- Try to breathe through your nose, using your stomach muscles.
- Try to breathe slowly and regularly. It is important that you do not take a lot of quick deep breaths as this can make you feel dizzy or faint or even make your tension worse.
- If you place your hands on your stomach you will feel the movement if you are breathing properly. Feel your stomach flatten as you breathe out; hold it for a moment, then feel it fill out and expand as you breathe in.



## Simple relaxation routine

For this short routine you will need to imagine a 'Happy Image'. This can be:

- Repeating in your mind a sound or word which you find relaxing e.g. the sound of the sea or the word 'Calm'
- Thinking of an image which you find calming or soothing e.g. a quiet country scene, a flower, etc.
- Gazing on a fixed object in the room e.g. a picture or ornament, which you particularly like.



# The procedure

This simple method involves focusing on your breathing and on the pleasant / happy image.

1. Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Think about deeply relaxing your muscles, beginning at your feet and moving up to your face. Keep your muscles relaxed.
2. Breathe in through your nose and become aware of your breathing. Focus on your own **Happy Image** and breathe out through your mouth.
3. Do not worry about whether you are good at the exercise. Keep a passive attitude and allow relaxation to happen at its own pace.
4. Distressing thoughts will probably come into your mind. Do not dwell on them, simply return to your **Happy Image**.
5. Continue for 10-20 minutes. When you finish, sit quietly with your eyes closed for a few moments and then with your eyes open. Do not stand up and begin moving around too soon.

## Cued relaxation

When you are able to achieve a relaxed state using the above exercises, you can begin to practice applying these skills throughout the day.

All you need is something which will catch your eye regularly to remind you to:

**Drop your shoulders; relax the muscles in your body; check your breathing pattern; relax.**

- As a cue or reminder, you might use a small coloured spot on your watch or clock, which you look at regularly. Every time you see the spot, you will be reminded to relax.

- This way, you will be practising your relaxation skills several times each day.
- There are all sorts of cues which you might use. Work out what catches your eye regularly throughout the day and use it as your reminder.
- With time and regular practice, relaxation will become a way of life. You are bound to experience stress, anxiety and tension at some time – this is normal. However, you should now have a better awareness of this and the skills to bring it under control.



## Quick muscle relaxation

Sitting on a chair, tense up all the muscles in your legs. Hold for a few seconds, noticing the tension.

- Now let go and relax, taking a deep slow breath out at the same time.
- Notice how your legs feel loose, floppy and relaxed now.
- Sit and enjoy the relaxation for a moment.
- Now do the same with your arms. Tense them up, hold for a second, then let them go loose and relaxed, taking a deep slow breath out as you do.

**Different exercises suit different people. Try all three then practise the one that you like best. With practice, the relaxation response will come with little effort and you will be able to respond to stress by relaxing almost automatically.**

**It is necessary to practice two or three times a day.**



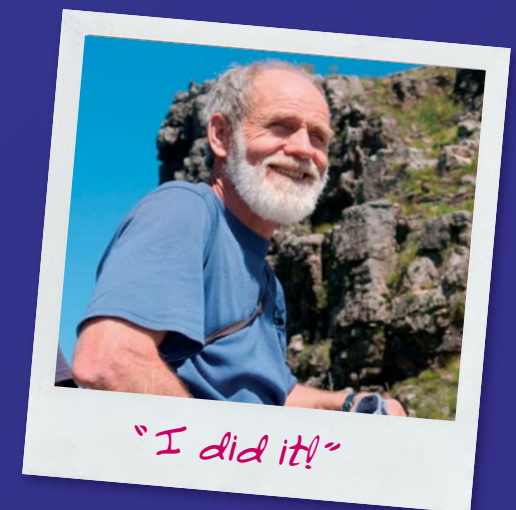
## Further information

We hope that you have found this booklet useful.

If you feel you would like more help or advice, you could ask your doctor to refer you to a psychologist, who could work with you to regain your confidence.

Other professionals, such as occupational therapists and physiotherapists, might also be able to help you improve your walking.

Ask your doctor for more information.



*Information reproduced with permission from Vicki Parlane, Assistant Psychologist and Dr Jessica Read, Clinical Psychologist Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust*

©Greater Manchester West Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

*All rights reserved. Not to be reproduced in whole or in part without the permission of the copyright owner.*

If you would like more copies of this leaflet  
please contact:  
Camden REACH  
Tel: 0845 900 0684 / Fax: 020 7530 5251

Published March 2009. Produced by Fresh Lemon.