

Relaxation

Post-Covid fatigue



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Introduction

This booklet provides an overview about relaxation and its importance in management of fatigue symptoms.

It covers:

- An explanation about relaxation
- Impact of stress on the body
- Benefits of relaxation
- Relaxation techniques
- Tips and strategies for engaging in relaxation



What is relaxation?

The aim of relaxation is to reduce mental and physical tension so that the body and mind is rested. It can be helpful in managing a variety of health conditions. When our body is in its natural relaxed state, our heart rate and breathing rate is slower, our blood pressure is lower, and we experience a feeling of increased wellbeing.

Relaxation techniques are generally considered safe for most healthy people, however there may be some techniques that may not be helpful or suitable for some health conditions, as they may bring on further emotional stress, for example if you have experienced traumatic events.

Learning to relax is particularly important for people experiencing fatigue because relaxation helps with energy conservation - enabling you to make the most of your body's available energy. It is also an essential part of activity management alongside other aspects of your lifestyle such as your emotional wellbeing, what you eat and how you sleep.

You may consider watching TV, being on your phone or reading a book a good way to unwind. Whilst you may regard these as relaxing, be aware that they do require a significant degree of energy expenditure, as the brain is stimulated to meet the cognitive demands of these activities.

Ask yourself:

What does relaxation look like to me?

Activity, rest, and relaxation

Activity is any task that requires physical or mental effort such as eating, brushing teeth, driving or being on a computer. Different activities require varying degrees of energy and different tasks affect people in different ways. For example, some people may find mental tasks or emotional tasks more fatiguing than physical tasks.

Rest can mean different things to different people. For some people rest may mean sleeping whereas for others it may mean sitting or lying down quietly.

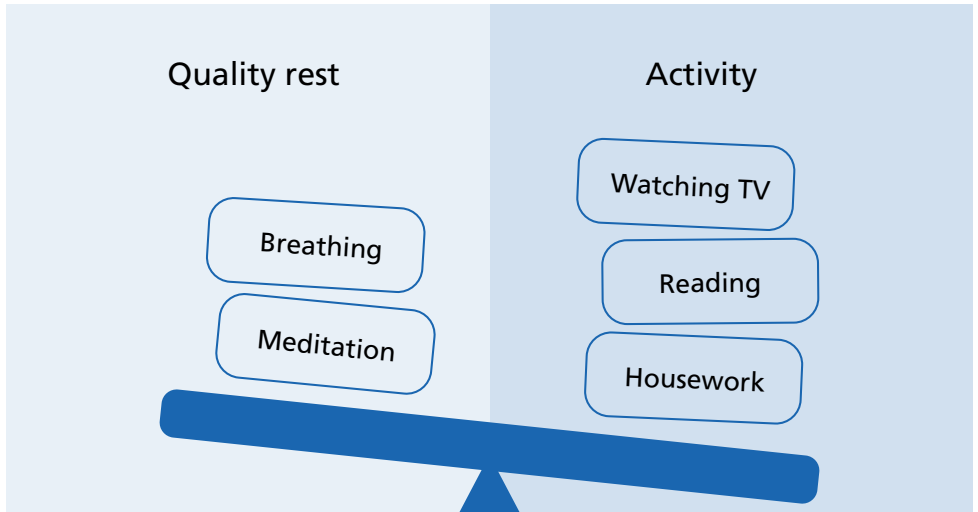
When supporting people with fatigue, rest also means relaxation. When we are resting or relaxing effectively it enables the body and mind to recharge. To achieve quality rest, it is important to see relaxation as a positive strategy that helps to reduce tension in your body and mind.

Ask yourself:

How do I currently rest / relax?

Balancing activity and rest

Balancing activity with quality rest throughout the day is an important part of self-managing fatigue. Without adequate periods of rest, our bodies cannot function effectively.



Doing too much

Too little rest during the day and 'pushing through' to maintain a lifestyle that may not be realistic, can result in an increase in symptoms and a perpetuation of the boom and bust pattern.

Only resting when you absolutely have to, is not helping your body to function effectively. It is important to use relaxation as a strategy to help prevent an increase in symptoms not just when an increase in symptoms occurs.

Over-resting

Over-resting (i.e. resting for hours or days) can lead to physical deconditioning of the body, adversely affecting the muscular system, immune system, and the nervous system. Prolonged rest can also affect mental health, leading to sluggishness, low mood and lack of motivation.

Our bodies are designed to move, so it is important to remain mobile even at reduced levels to maintain the body's ability to function. Having smaller amounts of rest between periods of activity is physiologically better than taking long periods of rest.

Ask yourself:

How much rest do I feel I currently take on a daily basis?

| Too much? | About the right level? | Too little? |
|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Always feel sluggish | Able to replenish energy somewhat | "Tired but wired" |
| Difficult to introduce more activity | Can manage a consistent level of activity | Exhausted when activity stops |
| Difficulty sleeping | | Difficulty waking |

Whether you are doing too much or too little activity, rest is essential to managing fatigue. Remember it is the quality of the rest that is important to enhance the relaxed state of the body and mind. For example, if you have physically stopped an activity and are sitting down for a rest but worrying about the things you should be doing, you will not feel rested or relaxed.

Relaxation is also on a continuum between wakefulness and sleep. It is important to try not to go to sleep during a relaxation session (unless you are using relaxation techniques to assist with sleep as part of your wind down routine at bedtime) as this may affect your sleep-wake cycle.

Stress response

There are two parts to the autonomic nervous system – sympathetic and parasympathetic and they work in opposition to each other. When our brain perceives something as a threat (such as a virus) it will activate the Sympathetic Nervous System's 'fight or flight' response. This requires large amounts of energy in the body to be accessed for short term use, and we may experience the following reactions and symptoms:

Physical reactions

- Brain working overtime
- Muscles tense
- Increase in breathing
- Increase in heart rate
- Liver releases glucose for energy
- Decrease in digestive activity
- Body cools itself
- Brain and senses on high alert

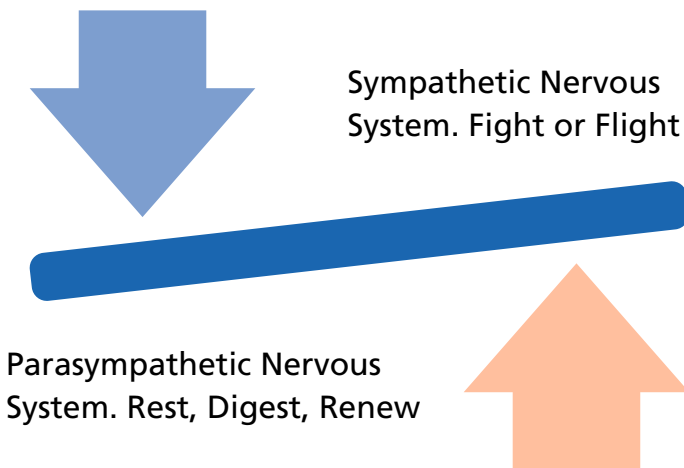
Symptoms

- Panic, preoccupation
- Jelly legs, muscle aches, headaches
- Over-breathing, chest pains, palpitations
- Increased blood pressure
- Indigestion, excess sugar
- Nausea, indigestion, constipation
- Excessive sweating, blushing
- Problem solving, straining to hear noises

In an emergency, this can be a lifesaving response, for example if you have narrowly missed having an accident. Once the stress is removed, the parasympathetic nervous system is activated to help calm us down. Energy is then utilised in a long-term way for healing and reorganising and the physical signs and reactions go away.

The stress response can however, become a long-term problem if it occurs in response to **non-emergency situations** within every-day life. For example, when it has been activated over a long period of time or on a regular basis such as leading a busy lifestyle, worrying about work, money, family or managing a chronic illness. It is also important to realise that we can be under stress even though we may not feel stressed. This is because our bodies may have got used to reacting in permanent stress mode.

When stress continues, regardless of the cause, it upsets the natural balance of the autonomic nervous system.



Learning to relax by engaging in relaxation techniques alongside establishing a good routine, sleep pattern, eating well, and dealing with difficult emotions and situations will help to assist in balancing the autonomic nervous system and prevent symptoms of stress.

The benefits of relaxation?

Relaxation has a positive effect on our overall health and wellbeing. When we are in a relaxed state, we feel calm with reduced tension in our body and mind.

Improved Sleep

Promotes restful sleep by helping to clear our minds of daily stressors and negative thoughts.

Improved Self-confidence

Relaxation enhances our natural coping skills and acts as an enabling process for dealing with problems.

Improved Personal Relationships

It is easier to relate to others when we are feeling calm, relaxed and rational.

Well-being

It provides time and space to concentrate on our wellbeing and to gain control in situations where anxiety/stress levels may be high.

Positive Psychological Effect

Heart and breathing rate slows. Tension is reduced. Hormones are released into the bloodstream that helps us to feel calmer.

Improved Performance

It enhances our natural coping skills, enabling us to deal with problems. Self-awareness is raised improving performance in daily activities.

Reduced Fatigue

By helping to 'recharge' and top up energy reserves.

Reduced Pain

Pain can occur as a result of tension. Relaxation can help reduce it and relieve aching muscles.

Coping with Stress

It reduces our stress response to situations and provides a feeling of wellbeing.

Types of relaxation

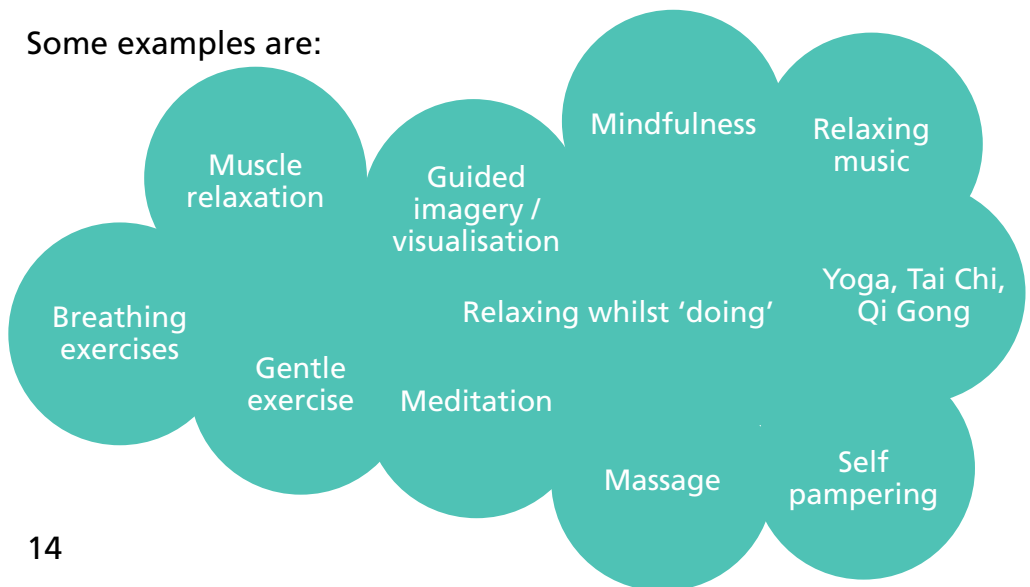
There are different levels of feeling relaxed and various ways in which to achieve a state of relaxation. There is relaxation by 'doing' which involves engaging in activities you enjoy, to distract or refresh you from fatigue that you may be experiencing.

Whilst it is possible to experience some degree of relaxation using this method, it is important not to get too absorbed in these types of activities for longer than you can tolerate with your current baseline, as this could cause a flare up in symptoms.

There is also relaxation by 'being' which involves more formal types of relaxation such as breathing exercises, guided visualisation and mindfulness meditation.

Knowing what relaxation techniques will work for you, is down to personal choice and preference. Whichever method or methods of relaxation you choose, regular practice will help.

Some examples are:



Ask yourself:

What relaxation techniques have I tried
and/or would like to try?

Breathing and relaxation

Achieving good quality rest that is restorative includes being able to breathe effectively, and most relaxation techniques use breath control in some way. If we are tense, worried or anxious we may chest breathe which is shallow and inefficient.

Abdominal breathing (using the diaphragm rather than the chest muscles) helps us to relax physically and mentally as the body is provided with sufficient oxygen, carbon dioxide is expelled, and mental and physical tension is released more easily. There are many examples of breathing techniques on the internet.

See an example of a deep breathing exercise on the next page. Only do this if you are comfortable doing so and it does not exacerbate any breathlessness you may have resulting from Long Covid.

Deep breathing exercise

1. Make sure you're comfortable. You can lie on your back in bed or on the floor with a pillow under your head and knees. Or you can sit in a chair with your shoulders, head, and neck supported against the back of the chair.
2. Breathe in through your nose. Let your belly fill with air.
3. Breathe out through your nose.
4. Place one hand on your belly. Place the other hand on your chest.
5. As you breathe in, feel your belly rise. As you breathe out, feel your belly lower. The hand on your belly should move more than the one on your chest.
6. Take three more full, deep breaths. Breathe fully into your belly as it rises and falls with your breath.

Simple breathing exercises

These breathing exercises can be useful to practice at regular intervals throughout the day.

1. Take a deep, slow breath in and hold it for 5 seconds. Feel your abdomen expand as you do this.
2. Breathe out slowly, to a count of 5.
3. Breathe in again, make every breath slow and steady and exactly the same as the one before it and the one after it.
4. As you breathe out, concentrate on expelling ALL the air in your lungs.
5. If you're alone, you could make a noise like "who" as you do this to help you feel the air being let out. Keep the outbreath going for as long as you can. Keep it relaxed for a few seconds before you inhale again.

Wherever you are (e.g. in the car, supermarket, awaiting an appointment etc.)

- Consider your posture e.g. shoulders down
- Take 2 or 3 slightly slower, slightly deeper out-breaths (just let the in-breath happen)
- Carry on with whatever you were doing, but just a little slower

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is an ancient eastern practice that does not conflict with any beliefs or traditions, whether religious, cultural, or scientific. We can often rush through life without stopping to notice what is going on around us. For example, we may be relieving past problems or worrying about future events.

Mindfulness is about focusing on the present moment, noticing our thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds and smells in a non-judgemental way. Being aware of our bodily sensations can help us to make beneficial choices on how to respond to fatigue symptoms that we may be experiencing.

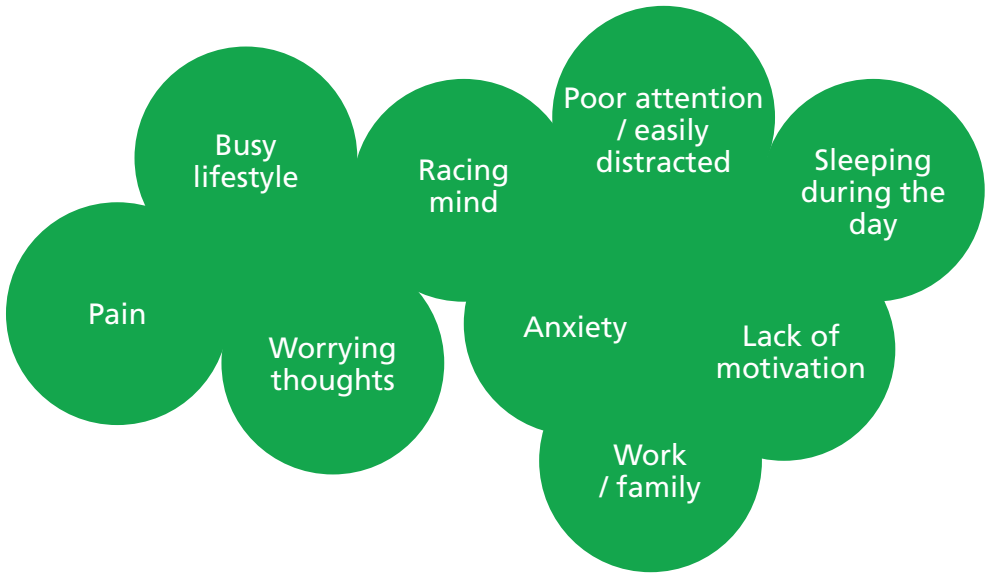
Being in the present moment can also help us to tune into the pleasurable experiences in life. There are many different mindfulness practices and an example from headspace www.headspace.com is below:

Body scan

1. With your eyes closed, start at the top of your head and mentally 'scan' down your body.
2. Bring awareness to your head and neck. Do you notice any feelings, sensations or discomfort i.e. does the area feel relaxed or tense, comfortable or uncomfortable, energetic, or tired?
3. Repeat this practice for your shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, hips, legs, feet and so on.
4. Spend approximately 20-30 seconds to focus on each body part.
5. When you encounter areas of tension during the scan, don't struggle. Instead focus your attention on them and breathe. Try to visualise the tension or discomfort leaving your body.
6. Take note of your observations and when thoughts or feelings arise, return to the area of the body where you last left off.
7. Don't try to change anything. You are simply building a picture of how your body feels right now, in the moment.

Relaxation is a skill



Learning to relax is a skill and to achieve effective rest takes time, practice and planning. There may be many reasons why you may find it hard to prioritise relaxation. Some examples are:



Starting to identify factors that may be hindering or helping your ability to engage in relaxation will enable you to start to plan how you can incorporate relaxation into your daily routine.

Ask yourself:

What factors may be helping or hindering my ability to engage in relaxation?

| Helping  | Hindering  |
|---|---|
| | |

Relaxation toolkit

Building a 'tool kit' of different techniques can be useful as it allows you to use different relaxation techniques depending on the environment, your lifestyle, the situation you are in and how you are feeling. Think about a recipe for a cake - there may be 10 different recipes to try and you may find three or four that you like. Some may be quick and easy recipes, others more difficult and time consuming to make. What you bake and when will depend on your mood, the time you have available and what you are aiming to achieve.

When should I relax and for how long?

Thinking about all the activities you do in the day can help to identify how frequently and for how long you may need to take rest breaks. Think of a bridge, there are many pillars that are needed to support that bridge to make it robust and stable.

Identifying how many pillars of rest you will need to support your daily activities and deciding when (time), where and how long you will need to rest for, is a helpful first step in starting to manage your energy levels more effectively. It is advisable however, to avoid resting for longer than 60 minutes, as this can add to symptoms. Also avoid using your bed for resting (to reduce the likelihood of falling asleep during the day, which can interfere with night-time sleeping patterns). Even on a “slower day” getting up regularly and walking around the room for short periods, stretching and breathing will help to control symptoms.



An example is provided below and there will be a blank relaxation plan in the homework section of the booklet for you to complete.

| Relaxation Exercise | When (time) | Where | Duration |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passive muscle relaxation • Deep breathing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After work • Mid-morning and mid-afternoon break | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In chair in lounge • In spare office at work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 mins • 5 minutes per session |

How to relax

If relaxation is new to you, it may be helpful to start using relaxation techniques during a quiet part of the day and as part of your wind down routine in the evening.

To be able to switch off physically and mentally it is important to create a relaxing space and the following relaxation tips may help:

| | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comfortable position • Comfortable room temperature • Quiet space • Loosen clothing, remove shoes, glasses • Turn down the lights / draw the curtains • Be aware of your breathing  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid crossing arms, hands, legs, feet • Avoid relaxing on a full stomach • Don't worry about how you are doing • Don't fight distracting thoughts, observe them and refocus on relaxation  |
|---|--|

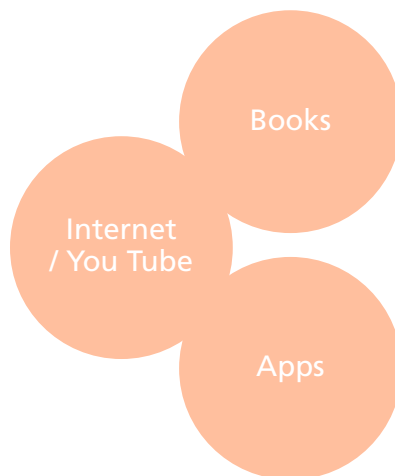
You may then be able to extend your practice so that you are engaging in relaxation techniques during the day in different situations, for example whilst taking breaks at work or when faced with stressful or challenging situations.

Awareness is key. By learning to relax you will connect with your body and mind and start to become more in tune with how you are feeling and if you are holding any tension.

Do not only practice relaxation when you are fatigued, stressed or anxious. It is better to take a preventative approach rather than a reactive approach by making relaxation part of your daily life and rest routine. Be kind to yourself, the more you practice relaxation techniques the more benefits you will accrue.

Where now?

There are many ways to relax and it is much more effective if you carry out your own research to find techniques that suit your personal preference and lifestyle.



Some examples are:

Websites

Headspace. Available from: www.headspace.com

Calm. Available from: www.calm.com

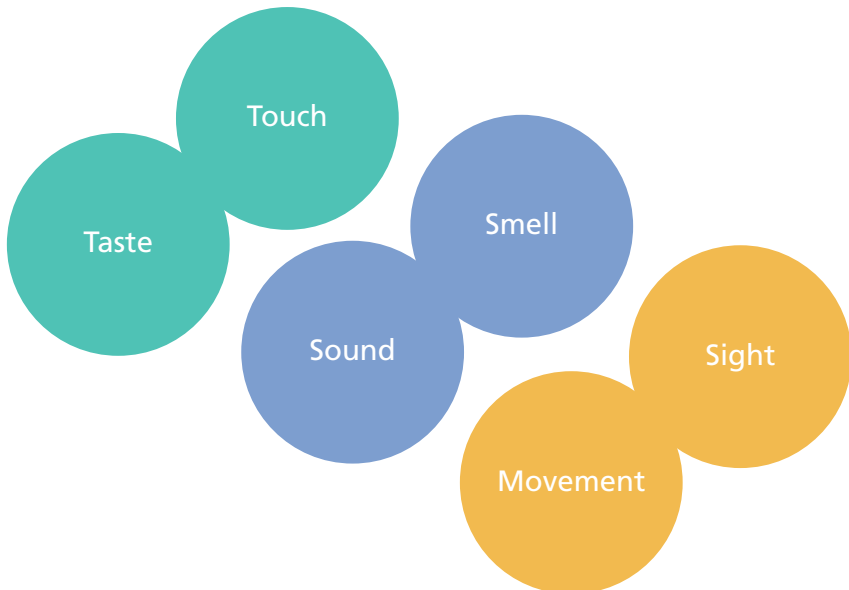
Videos

Every Mind Matters - Progressive muscle relaxation exercise.
Available from: www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GURt2pvdAg

Every Mind Matters - Mindful breathing exercise. Available from:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfDTp2GogaQ

Sensory modulation

It may also be helpful to consider your sensory preference.



For example, if you like touch/pressure you may enjoy a massage, or if you respond well to smells, adding a relaxing essential oil such as lavender to a diffuser may help to create a calming atmosphere before you commence your relaxation exercise.

Keeping a log of the various relaxation techniques you have tried can be a useful way to keep track of what works for you. Remember you may want to build up a selection so that you do not get bored.

If relaxation is a new skill for you, start slowly as it will take time to become familiar with different relaxation techniques.

In the homework section there is a blank relaxation log and relaxation plan for you to complete.

Relaxation log

(Scale 0 -10. (0 – the least relaxed. 10 the most relaxed)

| Date & Time | Relaxation Technique | How long I engaged in it for | How relaxed I felt before | How relaxed I felt afterwards | Comments |
|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| E.g. 7/7/21 - 9pm | Body scan | 10 mins | 2 | 6 | Felt tense in shoulders, difficult to switch off mentally. Felt less tense overall as time went on. Enjoyed this technique. |
| | | | | | |
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Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

Leeds and York Partnership Foundation Trust for allowing us to use material written by Dr Sue Pemberton and also published as follows:

Pemberton, S. (2009) Fighting Fatigue. A practical guide to managing the symptoms of CFS/ME. London: Hammersmith Press.

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Headspace (2020) Body scan meditation to reduce stress [Online]. Available from: <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/body-scan> [Accessed: 19/10/20].

WebMd (2019) Breathing techniques for stress relief [Online]. Available from: <https://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/stress-relief-breathing-techniques#1> [Accessed: 19/10/20].

Patient Advice and Liaison Service

For information about CPFT services or to raise an issue, contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on Freephone 0800 376 0775, or e-mail pals@cpft.nhs.uk

Out-of-hours service for CPFT mental health service users

Please call NHS 111 for health advice and support.

If you require this information in another format such as braille, large print or another language, please let us know.