Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief

The body’s natural relaxation response is a powerful antidote to stress. Relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, and yoga can help you activate this relaxation response. When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in your everyday stress levels. What’s more, they also serve a protective quality by teaching you how to stay calm when life throws you a curveball or if you happen to be enrolled in medical school!

The Relaxation Response

Whenever we encounter a stressful event, our bodies undergo a series of hormonal and biochemical changes. This automatic stress response, or the fight-or-flight reaction, puts our bodies in alarm mode: heart rate speeds up, breath becomes shallow, muscles tense, and our digestive and immune systems temporarily shut down. The stress response is helpful in an emergency situation, but when it is activated on a frequent basis it puts strain on both mind and body,

No one can avoid all stress, but you can counteract the negative effects by learning how to induce the relaxation response, a state of deep rest. The relaxation response brings your system back into balance, reducing stress hormones, slowing down your muscles and organs, and increasing blood flow to the brain.

In addition to calming physical effects, research has shown that the relaxation response also increases energy and focus, combats illness, relieves aches and pains, heightens problem-solving abilities, and boosts motivation and productivity.

**The relaxation response is:**
- a mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed
- best done in an awake state
- becomes more effective with practice

**The relaxation response is not:**
- laying on the couch
- sleeping
- being lazy
Many relaxation techniques will help achieve the relaxation response. Those which have been widely researched include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visualization, yoga, and tai chi. The techniques are not hard to learn, but it takes consistent practice to reap the full benefits. It is recommended that you practice a minimum of 15-20 minutes daily and if possible, 30 minutes to one hour. In order to make relaxation a daily habit, choose one or a combination of techniques that you think really fit your lifestyle.

**Deep Breathing**

Deep breathing is a relaxation technique that is used in other relaxation practices, such as yoga, meditation, and visualization. It involves using the lungs and the abdomen or diaphragm. Most of us take shallow breaths from our upper chest instead of using our diaphragms. Shallow breathing limits the amount of oxygen we take in and when we are stressed our breathing becomes even shallower. This makes us feel more tense and anxious. Deep breathing encourages full oxygen exchange throughout the chest and lungs which calms the mind and the body.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chest Breathing</th>
<th>Abdominal Breathing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inhale about one teacup of oxygen</td>
<td>Inhale about a quart of oxygen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creates shorter, restless brain waves</td>
<td>Creates longer, slower brain waves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot relax, increases stress</td>
<td>Can relax quickly, decreases stress</td>
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**Directions:**

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
2. Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
3. Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
4. Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls.

In addition you may want to add counting as you breathe. This will help you focus on your breathing and distract you from any stressor that may be causing acute anxiety or stress, such as an exam or a job interview.

- Breathe in to a slow count of four.
- Hold your breath to a slow count of eight.
- Exhale to a slow count of twelve.

You may use any number with the same ratio, i.e. 3, 6, and 9 or 5, 10, and 15, or whatever is comfortable for you. If you have trouble breathing from your diaphragm while sitting up, lie on the floor, put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises when you inhale and drops when you exhale.
Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. Frequently we are unaware that we are holding our bodies in tension until it becomes very painful. This technique teaches you to become very familiar and aware of how tension and complete relaxation feels in different parts of the body. It is designed to teach you to recognize the first signs of muscular tension that accompanies stress so that you can quickly counteract the effects of tension by intentionally relaxing. As your body relaxes, so will your mind.

Basic procedure:
- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes and get in a comfortable position. You can be lying down or in a chair with your head supported.
- Take a few slow deep breaths and relax.
- Each muscle or muscle grouping is tensed for five to seven seconds then relaxed for twenty to thirty seconds.
- It is helpful if you use relaxing expressions as you release the tension, for example:
  - Let go of the tension.
  - Release the tension ---- I am feeling calm and rested.
  - Let any tension dissolve away.
  - Relax the muscles.
  - Let go more and more.

Long Form
1. Get in a comfortable position and relax. Now clench your right fist, tighter and tighter. Keep it clenched and notice the tension in your fist, hand and forearm. Now relax. Feel the looseness in your right hand and notice how different it feels. Repeat the entire procedure with your left hand, then both hands at the same time. Always notice the different feeling between tension and relaxation.
2. Now bend your elbows and tense your biceps. Tense them as hard as you can and notice the feeling of tautness. Relax and straighten your arms, noticing how it feels as the muscles relax.
3. Move your attention to your head and wrinkle your forehead as tight as you can. Frown and notice the strain throughout your forehead. Hold for a few seconds then relax. Imagine your entire forehead and scalp becoming smooth and at rest.
4. Close your eyes and squint them as tight as you can. Hold for a few seconds then relax and feel the difference.
5. Clench your jaw and bite hard. Hold, then relax your jaw. When the jaw is completely relaxed, your lips will be slightly parted. Let yourself really appreciate the contrast between tension and relaxation.
6. Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth until you feel an ache in the back of your mouth. Relax.
7. Purse your lips into an “O” shape. Hold, then relax. Notice that your forehead, scalp, eyes, jaw, and tongue are all completely relaxed.
8. Press your head back as far as it can comfortably go, then observe the tension. Roll it to the right and feel the changing locus of stress. Roll it to the left. Straighten your head.
and bring it forward, press your chin against your chest. Feel the tension in your throat and the back of your neck. Relax, allowing your head to return to a comfortable position. Let the relaxation deepen.

9. Shrug your shoulders. Keep the tension as you hunch your head down between your shoulders. Relax your shoulders. Drop them back and feel the release of tension spreading through your neck, throat, and shoulders.

Give your entire body a chance to relax. Feel the comfort and the heaviness.

10. Breathe in and fill your lungs completely. Hold your breath and notice the tension. Exhale and let the air hiss out. Breathe slowly and gently. Repeat this several times and notice the tension draining from your body as you exhale.

11. Tighten your stomach and hold. Relax.

12. Arch your back and notice the tension in your lower back. Try to isolate the muscles and keep the rest of your body as relaxed as possible. Now relax.

13. Tighten your buttocks and thighs. Flex your thighs by pressing down your heels as hard as you can. Relax and feel the difference.


15. Bend your toes toward your shins. Relax again.

Close your eyes and see and feel the heaviness throughout your body as the relaxation deepens.

Enjoy the sensation of complete relaxation.

- Relax your feet, ankles, calves, shins, knees, thighs, and buttocks.
- Let the relaxation spread to your stomach, lower back and chest. Let go more and more.
- Experience the relaxation deepening in your shoulders, arms and hands.
- Deeper and deeper. Notice the feeling of looseness and relaxation in your neck, jaws, and all your facial muscles.

Short Form

The following is a procedure for achieving deep muscle relaxation quickly. Whole muscle groups are simultaneously tensed and then relaxed. As before, repeat each procedure at least once, tensing each muscle group from five to seven seconds and then relaxing from 20-30 seconds. Remember to notice the contrast between the sensations of tension and relaxation.

1. Curl both fists, tightening biceps and forearms. Relax.

2. Wrinkle up your forehead. At the same time, press your head as far back as possible, roll it clockwise in a complete circle, reverse. Now wrinkle up the muscles of your face like a walnut: frowning, eyes squinted, lips pursed, tongue pressed to the roof of your mouth, and shoulders hunched. Relax.

3. Arch your back as you take a deep breath into the chest. Hold. Relax. Take a deep breath, pressing out the stomach. Hold. Relax.

Visualization
You can significantly reduce stress with something enormously powerful: your imagination. Everybody visualizes. Daydreams, memories, and self-talk are all types of visualization. Visualization is effective in treating many stress-related and physical illnesses, including headaches, muscle spasms, chronic pain, and general or situation-specific anxiety.

Directions
1. Loosen your clothing, lie down or sit comfortably in a quiet place, and close your eyes.
2. Take a few deep breaths and relax. Scan your body and release any tension.
3. Imagine a scene or image using all of your senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. For example, imagine the sights of a green woodland with different types of trees, wild flowers, a blue sky, white, puffy clouds, and pine needles on the ground. Hear the water of a brook as it runs over the wet and glistening rocks. Hear the sound of a gentle breeze in the leaves and feel the coolness on your cheeks and arms. Listen to the birds and smell the fresh scents of pine needles and the earth. Feel the softness of the pine needles as you sit next to the brook and imagine taking a drink of the cold, clear mountain spring water.
4. Use short, positive statements that affirm your ability to relax. For example: *Tension flows from my body.* *I'm totally and completely relaxed.*
5. Practice two to three times per day. Try in the morning before you get out of bed, and at night before going to sleep.

Other scenarios may include sitting on a beach, watching the sun set or rise, being in a safe and comfortable room, in a garden, or your own backyard. It doesn’t matter as long as the place makes you feel relaxed and has no emotional charge.

You can also use this technique to achieve specific goals. For example, a runner preparing for a race would visualize her race on the course daily. She would feel the pressure when running up a hill, the exhaustion after running several miles and she would imagine sprinting to the finish line. When she actually ran in the race, she set a personal record and a record for her age group!

See yourself improving your academic performance by visualizing taking your next test completely calm and confident!

Adapted from: *Study Skills and Test-Taking Strategies for Medical Students* by Deborah D. Shain
Springer-Verlag Publishers