

Relaxation Techniques

INTRODUCTION

How many times have you said to yourself, "I wish I could find a way to relax?" In times of stress, it can seem that relaxing is easier said than done. This handout describes the best-known and most effective ways for relieving stress and anxiety with relaxation techniques. The techniques are presented in two groups: those you can do by yourself and those that you can do with the help of another person.

TECHNIQUES YOU CAN DO BY YOURSELF

In this section, you will learn about the following techniques. Brief descriptions are provided, along with ways to learn more.

- Visualization and guided imagery, or self-hypnosis
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Deep breathing
- Physical exercise
- Developing your interests
- Focusing on what you can control
- Meditation
- Affirmations
- Journaling
- Taking a warm bath
- Music and sound

Visualization and Guided Imagery, or Self-Hypnosis Visualization is a self-calming technique that is easy to learn and use. It involves visualizing images or scenes that create feelings of calm and relaxation. The steps are as follows:

- Find a place where you will not be interrupted.
- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes and breathe in and out deeply.
- Visualize a scene that will make you feel calm, such as a place in nature. Imagine all of the details as specifically as you can, such as how warm the breeze feels blowing gently across your body, the warmth of the sun on your arms and legs, or how comfortable you feel lying on the beach or relaxing under a tree.
- The process of visualization can be accomplished by yourself without any equipment or props. The most important thing is to focus your imagination on soothing, positive, relaxing images.
- The process of guided imagery, or self-hypnosis, is similar to visualization and is easy to learn. The simplest way to learn this technique is to purchase a self-hypnosis audiotope

from almost any bookstore. You may also visit a certified hypno-therapist and have an audiotape made especially for you.

Progressive Muscle

Relaxation Progressive muscle relaxation is an easy way to relax the body. It is a popular, effective, and easy-to-learn technique developed during the 1930s. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tightening or tensing the muscles and then letting go and relaxing them. It begins in a way similar to visualization and guided imagery, but it involves physical as well as emotional components.

The following are the steps in progressive muscle relaxation:

- Find a place where you will not be interrupted.
- Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
- Close your eyes and breathe in and out deeply.
- Begin the tensing-and-relaxing process with the bottoms of your feet and your ankles. Place your awareness on your feet and ankles and make them tense and rigid. Then, let the tension go and relax. Notice how the muscles in your feet and ankles feel as the tension flows out of them.
- Continue the tensing-and-relaxing process by moving up your legs and through your torso, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, head, and face. Make each part of your body feel tense for a moment; then let the tension go. Continue to breathe deeply and keep your eyes closed. Notice how the relaxation feels in each part of your body.
- By practicing progressive muscle relaxation, you develop more awareness of when you begin to feel tense so that you take steps to relax yourself. Doing so helps you have more control over your body and its reaction to stress.
- Progressive muscle relaxation is not recommended for some people, including those with back problems or muscle spasms.

Deep Breathing

This simple technique helps you relax. All you have to do is breathe in deeply, hold your breath for a few seconds, and exhale slowly. Repeat this process a few times and you will feel calmer. Remind yourself to do this technique a few times each day.

Physical Exercise

People who get regular physical exercise seem to respond better to stressful situations. Although researchers disagree on the reasons for this improved response, they have noted that exercise does seem to increase certain brain chemicals, such as norepinephrine, that enhance the body's ability to deal with stress. Go for a walk, go to the gym, or ride a bike—any type of exercise has positive benefits.

"The simplest physical exercises, if done regularly, help people relax. Go for a walk, go to the gym, or ride a bike—any type of exercise has positive benefits."

Develop Your Interests

An important way to relax is to make time to do things that you enjoy. Think of things that make

you smile and do them regularly. Your list of favorites might include writing, reading, painting, dancing, listening to your favorite music, or spending an afternoon at an art gallery with a friend. As long as you enjoy it, the activity will help you relax.

Focus on What You Can Control

Teach yourself to stop worrying about things you have no control over. Focus instead on things you can influence. You will feel less stressed as a result.

Meditation

Almost everyone knows what it is like to worry about things. Sometimes it can be overwhelming— your mind becomes a jumble of thoughts and questions. Meditation can help quiet your mind and put a stop to the voice-over or commentary that sometimes threatens to take over. People have meditated for centuries because of its effectiveness in relaxing and settling the mind.

The simplest meditation technique is to focus your attention on an object or spot in the room. (It can be anything.) Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Gaze at the object or spot, concentrating your attention on it for a few minutes and breathing slowly and deeply. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the object or spot. You may want to choose a word to repeat as you breathe deeply and focus on the object or spot.

After a few minutes of meditation, you will most likely feel more relaxed. Work your way up to a 20-minute meditation session in the morning and another 20-minute session at night; you will notice the calming effects.

Affirmations

An affirmation is a positive statement that you say to yourself several times each day. Many people who use affirmations make a list of 5 to 10 statements and write them on a card.

They repeat the affirmations to themselves regularly. Incorporating these positive thoughts into your day is a way to reduce any anxiety that you may feel, because the positive thoughts replace the negative thoughts.

Here are some examples of positive affirmations. You may use these to affirmations write your own.

- I am calm and relaxed.
- I am free of all worry and stress.
- I meet stressful situations with calm and determination.
- I take good care of my mind and body.
- I attract positive energy.

Journaling

Writing in a private journal is an excellent way to explore your feelings and thoughts. Doing so can help you identify sources of stress in your life and express your feelings about them. If you are unsure of what to write about, here are some ideas:

- Describe what happened today and how you felt about it.
- Write a letter to a person you are angry with. Say everything you are feeling and wish you had the nerve to say.
- Make a list of all the things you are grateful for. List all of the big things and all of the small things, as well as everything in between.
- Make a list of the things that you feel upset about right now.
- Write down as many as you can think of until you can't think of any more; then choose the top five.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Benson, Herbert. *The Relaxation Response*. New York: Avon, 1990.

Benson, Herbert and Proctor, William. *Beyond the Relaxation Response: How to Harness the Healing Power of your Personal Beliefs*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1994.

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Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization*. New York: Bantam, 1983.

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