

Relaxation and Relaxation Exercises

When we are under stress the body goes into survival mode. It produces stress hormones, which gear us up to respond to perceived danger. This has come to be known as the “fight or flight” response. In that state, the heart rate increases, respiration becomes rapid and shallow, there is a rise in blood pressure, and the brain itself moves into a primitive “survival” mode, suppressing normal thought functions (evaluation, planning, deciding, encoding memory normally, etc.). The result of this is that we react rather than being able to evaluate and plan a response to the stressor. Under certain circumstances, the body may be in a constant state of “fight or flight,” which is exhausting and can contribute to the development of physical stress-related disorders, such as cardiac problems, chronic high blood pressure, and increased risk of stroke.

Tips for relaxation

Find a quiet space where you won't be interrupted for at least 30 minutes. Turn the lights down if you like. It's helpful to wear loose, comfortable clothing. If there is unavoidable noise, it may help to put on some background music or a tape of natural sounds. Turn off the phone and give yourself permission to devote some time to self-care.

You may sit or lie down for relaxation. If you sit in a chair, it's preferable to have your spine straight and supported by the chair back. If you lie down, you may want your back flat, and legs straight. It's preferable to have your legs uncrossed, extended, so you can feel the flow of energy. These are all just suggestions, however; the most important thing is that you feel comfortable and free to position yourself as you need.

Research shows that relaxing the body will relax the mind, and vice versa. If you struggle with racing, obsessive or intrusive thoughts, it might help to focus on the body. If you have a lot of physical tension or pain, it may be better to work on relaxing the mind. It's hard to predict which exercise will work for whom; it's best to try different relaxation exercises until you find the one that feels right. Remember that you are practicing a skill – like playing the piano. The more you practice, the more effective your relaxation work becomes.

It is important to work toward an attitude of acceptance of whatever occurs in your session, rather than growing impatient if you don't achieve a given result. You are just exploring the sensations or images you choose to focus on, and noticing what happens physically, emotionally and mentally. This “mindful” approach will pay off, and you will eventually be able to experience a state shift – that is a deep, peaceful state of relaxation. As you get better and better at the mindful self-observation, you will be able to use it all the time, to notice what is going on in your body, to notice your emotions, and to pay attention to the thoughts that may be contributing to your emotional distress.

It is helpful to start out each relaxation exercise by doing a simple check in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This exercise involves systematically tensing and relaxing different muscle groups. This is a good relaxation exercise for those who have trouble concentrating, or experience racing thoughts or other mental distractions. You may leave your eyes open or close them, as you prefer. Experiment with how much you tense your target muscles: some find tensing tightly is most helpful, while others use “threshold tensing,” just tightening enough to barely sense the tension.

Start out by taking a few deep breaths into the abdomen. Just notice the breath.

Do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.

Make a fist with your right hand, and tense the muscles in your right forearm, allowing the rest of the arm to remain relaxed.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the opposite arm, and in the rest of the body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles. You may imagine it's like a fire hose that was rigid and becomes more flexible as the water drains out, or a any image that works for you.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Repeat this with your left fist and forearm.

Raise your right shoulder, pin your right upper arm to the side of your body, and tense the muscles in the right upper arm and shoulder.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the opposite arm, and in the rest of the body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles. Find an image that captures this gradual release of tension for you: the sun melting ice, butter melting, releasing pressure with a valve, et cetera.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Repeat this with your left upper arm and shoulder.

With your leg extended, bend your right foot up at an angle, so the muscles of your right calf, shin, ankle and foot are tensed. Allow the rest of the leg to remain relaxed.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the rest of the leg, and in the rest of the body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles. You may imagine it's like a fire hose that was rigid and becomes more flexible as the water drains out.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Repeat this with your left foot and lower leg.

Tense the muscles in the right buttock and thigh, allowing the remaining muscles in the right leg to remain as relaxed as possible.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the opposite buttock and thigh, and in the rest of the body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Repeat this on the left side.

Suck in your abdominal muscles, and simultaneously push the small of your back against the chair or floor. Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the rest of your body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Let your head fall forward, or, alternatively, press your head backward against a wall, to tense the muscles in the back of your neck.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the rest of your body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Push your tongue against your upper palette, purse your lips, squint your eyes, tighten your jaw and scrunch up your face.

Study the sensations of tension.

Compare the tensed muscles to the relaxed ones in the rest of your body.

When you're ready, take a deep breath in, and, as you exhale, slowly, gradually release all of the tension, until every last bit has left the tensed muscles.

Spend a few moments studying and appreciating the sensations in the muscles once they are relaxed.

Take a few slow, deep breaths, and allow yourself to be aware of the sensations throughout your body. If there is any part that remains tense, repeat the exercise there until the tension is gone. Just allow the relaxation to move through your body in waves, allowing yourself to relax more, and more, and more deeply as you continue to take slow, deep breaths. If you like the seashore, you may want to think of gentle waves lapping at the sand, gradually washing away physical, and emotional, and mental tension, smoothing ... soothing ...relaxing.

When you are done with the relaxation exercise, allow yourself a few minutes to reorient before getting up. Just enjoy the sensations of relaxation throughout your body. You may notice sensations you have never been aware of before.

Meditation on the Breath

Sit in a chair with the spine straight and supported and the feet flat on the floor. Or, you may lie down flat on your back.

Do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.

Let your body begin to relax, consciously releasing tension. Begin to follow the breath. The stance for meditation and relaxation is always compassionate and curious, never judgmental or rigid. Notice the sensations as you take a breath in through your nose, inhale it through your throat, and into the lungs. Notice the sensations as the lungs expand to full capacity. Hold the breath for a moment, and notice how that feels. Then exhale slowly and completely, through the lips, and notice the release of tension in the lungs and rib cage. Pause briefly again before taking the next breath. Now, just allow your breathing be natural. Focus your attention on the subtle sensations of breathing.

If you like, you may imagine that you are sending warm, healing energy to every cell in your body with every in-breath, and washing away tension, pain and left over emotions with each out-breath. Just allow yourself to relax into each breath.

Your mind will probably wander after a few breaths. As thoughts intrude on your breath mindfulness, just notice them, label them as thoughts, and allow them to pass by unexplored, as if you were idly watching clouds float through a summer sky. Each time your attention wanders, just notice that and return your focus gently to your breath.

If you like, you may add a “mantra” to this breath meditation. For example, on the in-breath you may silently say the word “CALM” and on the out-breath, the word “CLEAR” (any combination you choose that suggests relaxation and letting go is fine). Just continue to breathe, slow deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the lips, focusing on the sensations, and returning to the breath each time the mind wanders.

Practicing this breath meditation has many advantages. Deep abdominal breaths cue the autonomic nervous system to relax. It is a very simple and effective way to relax the body quickly. It also allows you to notice what is happening in your body. It is helpful to discipline the mind to focus on a neutral or pleasant subject, rather than allowing it to be dominated by unpleasant, intrusive thoughts. Over time, you will gradually learn to focus and quiet your mind and calm your body by following your breath.

Sitting Relaxation

Sit in a chair with your spine straight and your back supported. Let your legs extend outward from the chair, with your feet flat on the floor.

Do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.

Focus on the sensations of your hips and thighs sitting on the chair. Notice the solidity of the chair, and the surface that supports your weight. Feel the soles of your feet, noticing the whole surface where they are in contact with the floor. Give yourself permission to give in to gravity and let the chair and floor support your weight.

Take a few slow, deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Focus on the feeling of the breath, the movement of your chest, rib cage, shoulders, the expansion of your lungs. Now imagine that you are breathing through the soles of your feet. As you take breath, imagine that you are bringing warm, healing energy to every cell of your body. As you breathe out, imagine that cleansing your body of tension, pain, and old, left over emotions.

As you breathe in, imagine filling your feet up with this positive, relaxing energy. Notice the warm, pleasant sensations moving into your toes, the balls of your feet, your arches, heels, insteps, and all through your feet. Give yourself the time you need to allow this to happen. Continue to focus on your feet until they feel completely relaxed and comfortable.

Take another breath in, and imagine it filling up your ankles and lower legs. If you can't immediately sense a part of your body, you might try rubbing or kneading it. Continue to move up through the calves and shins. Always take the time needed to work your way through the given part, allowing yourself to sense the shift in sensation. Move gradually into your knees, feeling the warmth move into them, then the backs of your thighs, tops of your thighs ... pelvis ... buttocks ... belly ... the small of your back ... midriff ... middle back ... chest ... upper back. Imagine the warm, relaxing energy moving through all your internal organs. Fill your lungs with the healing energy. As you continue to breathe, let the energy move into your shoulders, and upper arms, into your elbows, lower arms, wrists, palms, and fingers. Allowing the arms to remain relaxed, return to the shoulders and, again, fill them with warm, healing energy. Let the breath take this warm, relaxing energy up into the back of the neck, taking all the time you need to let the relaxing sensations massage and relax the neck muscles, then into the front of the neck, the throat, the tongue, the jaw, cheeks, the muscles around the mouth, nose and eyes, the temples and around and inside the ears, the scalp, the base of the skull. Take all the time you need for the relaxing sensations to fill and warm each part of your body.

Continue to breathe, and imagine your whole body is filled with glowing, golden light. You might imagine you are sitting on an elevator, and that, as it descends, floor by floor, you become more and more deeply relaxed. Just notice the changes you experience in your body as this happens. Appreciate the sense of peacefulness and calm and the pleasant sensations that you feel. Tell yourself that you can remain relaxed throughout the day, and that you will return to the room feeling calm and peaceful, but alert and energetic.

If you can't feel the warmth in parts of your body when you first try this exercise, or if there are parts of your body you can't feel at all, stay with it. You are working on establishing the connections you need to sense what is occurring in your body, which is crucial for healthy physical and emotional function.

Guided Imagery

Imagine going to a place, real or invented, where you feel safe, peaceful and calm. You want to take the time to develop the imagery so you fully experience this place with all your senses.

Start out with a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what's happening, without judgment or expectation. Let your breath deepen, and locate a spot in your body where you are starting to feel an opening, a lightness, or a loosening. Allow that to expand with every in-breath and every out-breath, imagining it gradually filling up your entire body. Imagine this relaxing energy moving through your body in waves, reaching every part of you.

Sea Shore

Imagine you are at the sea shore on a beautiful day. It's the perfect time of day, and the perfect time of year for you to be there. Recall the feeling you get in your body when you are at the beach, or what it was like when you were there as a child. Let yourself explore that feeling.

Imagine the warmth of the sun on the top of your head and your shoulders. Allow this image to develop. Perhaps there's a pleasant breeze, which you feel on your face and arms. Imagine the refreshing, salty breeze off the water, and breathe. Maybe you can even taste the salt spray.

Look up and down the beach and notice the expanse of sand, the color and texture of it, the way it sparkles in the sunlight. Imagine that you are standing in the dry, soft, sand, and feel it beneath your feet and between your toes. Imagine taking a few steps, and feeling what it's like to walk in deep, warm, soft sand. Move closer to the water and walk in the cool, firm sand. Feel it take on the shape of your feet as you walk. Look behind you and see your footprints. Notice the waves gently rolling in and lapping the shore, gradually smoothing those footprints out, rhythmically washing them away as the waves roll back out.

Look at the edge of the water and notice the color. Notice that color meeting the sand, and the waves gently lapping on the shore, rolling in, breaking softly, and going back out, over and over, endlessly. Hear the, deep, calming, rhythmic sound of the waves breaking on the beach. Look out to the horizon, and notice the waves as far back as you can see, rolling toward the shore, breaking, glittering in the sunlight. Notice the dancing light moving rhythmically across the whole surface of the water. Notice the place where the surf meets the sky, and see where the colors come together. Notice the light. Let yourself feel the expanse of the sky, and imagine breathing that in, filling yourself with that feeling of spaciousness, brightness and light.

If you like, you might imagine going into the water, and feeling gently carried on the waves, safe in the protected cove, warmed by the sun. Just rolling gently on the surf, carried safely on the buoyant waves.

When you come out of the water, find the clean, dry, soft towel you have placed there. Imagine lying down on the towel, feeling the warm sand beneath mold itself to your body. Notice how the warm, firm surface supports your whole body, and allow yourself to relax deeply into it, letting the warmth and comfort fill your body and mind.

When you have finished your guided meditation, take a few minutes to sit quietly, noticing what you are experiencing in your body, what your thoughts and emotions are like.

Other ideas for guided meditation: walking through a meadow, floating in the clouds, snorkeling in a coral reef, sitting by a fire in a cozy cabin, being in lovely, comfortable room, or in bed on a rainy day.

Rapid Relaxation Exercises

These are things you can do in a minute or two to feel more relaxed. As you start, take a moment to do a simple check-in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.

Abdominal Breathing

Abdominal breathing is the one of the most effective ways to relax quickly. By breathing with your diaphragm you will immediately signal your autonomic nervous system to relax. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Take some slow, deep breaths into the belly. It's helpful, but not essential, to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. If you are doing abdominal breathing correctly, the lower hand should move as much or more than the hand on your chest. Continue this slow, deep breathing for a couple of minutes, imagining the breath calming your body and clearing your mind. Notice how you feel.

Cook's Hookup

With legs extended, cross your left ankle over your right one. With your arms outstretched, cross your right wrist over your left one, then turn your hands so the palms are touching, clasp your fingers, and twist your hands down and toward your ribs, and rest them on your chest. Hold this. Once you have learned the technique, you don't need to use the hands if you prefer not to. position for two minutes as you breathe through your nose. On the in-breath, push your tongue against your upper palette, and on the out-breath push it against your lower palette. When the two minute period has elapsed, take a minute to notice what you experience in your body.

Quick Tensing and Relaxing

Tense your feet and lower legs and thighs and buttocks, pelvic muscles, abdomen, and lower back muscles. Hold them tightly for a few moments and notice the tension. Then release the tension completely and let all those muscles soften and become supple and relaxed.

Tense your hands, forearms, upper arms and shoulders, belly, midriff, middle and upper back, and facial muscles, and take a breath in so your rib cage is full extended. Notice how that feels, then release the breath and soften all those muscles, letting them become supple and relaxed. As you continue to breathe, focus on releasing, softening, letting go. Let the tension continue to flow out with every out-breath.

Creating a Symbol of Relaxation

When you are practicing relaxation, choose an image that conveys peace, comfort, or mental and physical letting go. This image can be anything you choose. You may think of the seashore, or a favorite spot in nature. It may be an image like the sun, a rope untwisting, ice melting, or a soothing color. It may be the face of a pet or of someone you love.

Every time you do relaxation, call up that image as you are becoming relaxed. Allow the symbol to grow and fill your awareness. Let all of the qualities of that symbol come to mind, and imagine them moving through your body on the rhythm of your breath. As you practice this more, you will be able to close your eyes anywhere and relax quickly by calling up your symbol and filling your awareness with it for a few minutes.