

Relaxation Techniques

What is Relaxation Training?

Relaxation is a voluntary letting go of tension. This tension can be physical tension in the muscles, or it can be psychological tension. This change brings about a general feeling of calm, both physically and mentally.

Importance of Relaxation Training

Muscles are designed to remain in a relaxed state until required to perform some physical activity. When you feel under stress for long periods of time, eventually you become unable to relax or cannot recognise tension. The tension no longer helps you perform your daily tasks and may even hinder normal activities. Because of the tension, you may feel jumpy, irritable, tired, or apprehensive, or experience frequent headaches and muscle pain.

A continual state of tension makes it easier for a panic attack to occur because the nervous system is already highly aroused. In this case, some minor event, such as an unexpected encounter with a friend, can trigger further tension that can lead to hyperventilation and panic. Even if you do not have panic attacks, you are more likely to feel anxious, constantly apprehensive, or have unpleasant obsessive worries when your body is in a continual state of tension. Some tension can be good for you, so it is important to learn to discriminate when tension is useful and when it is unnecessary.

Relaxation Training

1. Recognizing Tension

In order to recognise tension more readily; you should become aware of where in your body you tend to experience tension, and the characteristics of this tension – for example, pain, soreness, weakness, or tiredness of muscles. Note also which events in your life or within yourself tend to result in an increase in tension.

2. Learn to relax your body

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

In progressive relaxation, the muscles are relaxed by working your way around the body. You will learn to recognise and reduce muscle tension. Relaxation is a skill that is learned through practice. Do not despair if you do not reach deep level of relaxation during your early sessions- this can only be achieved through patience and practice. The more frequently you practice relaxation, the deeper the relaxation will be, the longer lasting the effect and the more quickly that anxiety can be reduced.

You should try to do relaxation exercises at least once per day to begin with as little distraction as possible.

Find a comfortable position (either on a chair or bed is fine) with good support for your head and shoulders. Some people prefer to do the exercises lying down, but do not use this position if you are likely to fall asleep: You cannot learn to relax while asleep. With time and practice, you will find that you can relax even in less than ideal circumstances, and in a variety of postures and situations. After

you have finished the relaxation, do not jump up right away as you might feel momentarily dizzy (this is a normal reaction). Get up slowly and try to preserve the state of relaxation for as long as possible.

Here are a few muscle relaxation exercises you may like to try:

Head

Wrinkle your forehead
Squint your eyes tightly
Open your mouth wide
Push your tongue against the roof of your open mouth
Clench your jaw tightly

Thighs, Calves, Ankles and Feet

Tighten your thigh muscles, trying not to involve abdominal muscles
Tense the calf muscles
Point your toes out directly in front feeling the tension in your ankles
Curl your toes under as if to touch the bottom of your feet
Bring your toes up as if to touch your knees

Isometric Relaxation

Isometric relaxation exercises involve rapid relaxation that can be applied in a wide variety of everyday situations. Because they do not involve any obvious change in posture or movement, they can be done quite unobtrusively, even when in company. In the early stages of training, you may have to do these exercises several times per day to counteract the tension and maintain a relaxed state, particularly when under stress. As you improve, they will take less time and become easier. Eventually, you will find that you are doing them without thinking- that is, they may well become a habit that you will use automatically to counter tension.

Isometric Relaxation: Basic Technique

1. Take a small breath and hold it for 2-3 seconds
2. At the same time, gradually tense a chosen muscle group
3. After 2-3 seconds breath out, and slowly say the word "relax" to yourself
4. Gradually let all the tension go from your muscles
5. If desired, close your eyes
6. For the next minute, each time you breathe out say the word 'relax' to yourself and let the tension flow out of your muscles.
7. Repeat if necessary with the same or other muscle groups until you feel relaxed.

Some examples where these exercises can be done.

- While sitting, slowly tense leg muscles by crossing your feet at the ankles and pressing down with the upper leg while trying to left the lower leg, or try to pull legs in opposite directions
- Place hands on the side of a chair and pull into the chair.
- While standing, lock legs stiffly straight, then release.
- Facial muscles can be tense and relaxed in a variety of ways, often by exaggerating different expressions, for example smiling, frowning, surprise.

Breathing Relaxation Techniques

One of the most powerful ways to relieve tension is with breathing relaxation techniques. Working with your breath is effective, convenient, and free. By deepening and slowing down the breath, you will become more relaxed.

1. Abdominal or Diaphragmatic Breathing

This is the most natural breathing. Watching a baby breathing gives you an idea what is diaphragmatic breathing. It is the simplest of all relaxation techniques, also called deep breathing, or abdominal breathing. It is deep and slow, rhythmic and relaxing. Diaphragmatic breathing relaxes the muscles, massages the internal organs, and allows more oxygen to flow through your body. At first, this way of breathing may feel awkward, but once you become familiar with the technique, you will be able to reduce stress on the spot by taking a few deep breaths.

Practising Diaphragmatic Breathing

The procedure is very simple and effective:

1. Find a comfortable spot.
2. Lie down or sit in a comfortable position and put your right hand on your diaphragm (just below the belly button).
3. Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
4. Put your left hand on your upper chest. You should feel no movement here. The breathing should come from your diaphragm and your right hand will gently rise and fall.
5. Notice the feeling and how it differs from chest breathing.
6. Consciously breathe through your nose, keeping your mouth closed. Feel the rising and falling of your diaphragm.
7. When you become used to breathing into your diaphragm, bring your attention to the flow of your breath. Just notice the flow. Is it smooth or jerky? Smooth it out, make it flow gently and smoothly.
8. Do not rush your breath. Be gentle. Let it flow and you will discover a rhythm to the breath.

Be patient - while "breathing" sounds like an easy thing to do - diaphragmatic breathing takes practice. Practice this breathing technique as often as you can for about 2-3 at a time. If you have trouble falling asleep, practice this relaxation technique before going to sleep - you may be surprised how easily you will fall asleep.

2. Alternate Nostril Breath

Alternate nostril breath is a technique used to balance, relax, and energize the whole-body system. As you consciously engage both nostrils, you assist your body to become more balanced.

- Gently press your thumb against the right nostril - closing it completely, and then inhale slowly through left nostril.
- Hold your breath for a few seconds. With your right forefinger close your left nostril as you release your thumb from the right nostril. Exhale through the right nostril, while keeping the left one closed. Hold for a few seconds.
- Inhale through the right nostril, hold, release your forefinger as you close your right nostril with your thumb. Exhale through the left nostril, while you keep the right nostril closed. Hold for a few seconds.
- Repeat. Continue this as many times as feels comfortable (but no more than 8).
- Conclude and breathe through both nostrils.

Never strain yourself when practicing breathing relaxation techniques (or anything else for that matter!). Your breath is your friend. Remember to be gentle.

3. 3-Minute Breathing Space Meditation

Script:

- As this is a brief, portable practice, for use “on the go” in the real world, it is important to start by taking on a different posture to signal to your mind that you are switching mental gears from doing mode, to being mode – so bringing yourself into a dignified sitting posture, with your back straight but not stiff and your chest open and shoulders relaxed. Allowing your eyes to close gently if that is comfortable for you. Letting your body express an open sense of alert attentiveness.
- Now, becoming aware of your experience in this moment. What story line is running through your mind? *(Pause)* Just noticing the thoughts as mental events, letting them come and go... so we acknowledge them, and we acknowledge any emotions that might also be present, in particular, bringing awareness to any uncomfortable or unpleasant emotions. *(Pause)* Just acknowledging any such emotions, observing their quality – not pushing them away, or wanting them to necessarily change, just noticing them as they are already present in our experience... And similarly with any physical sensations in the body, whether they be pleasant... unpleasant... or neutral... *(Pause)* Just bringing your open, attentive awareness to the sensations, simply observing them... that’s how it is right now. *(Pause)*
- So, we have now mindfully perceived our experience in this moment, we have stepped out of automatic pilot. Now, really gathering your awareness, and anchoring your attention on the movements of the breath. Focusing your awareness on the abdomen, rising on the inbreath, and falling back towards the spine on the outbreath. *(Pause)* Knowing when the breath is entering to the body; knowing when the breath is leaving the body. Just gently riding the waves of the breath. *(Pause)* Using the breath as an anchor to the present moment. As you breathe in... And as you breathe out... *(Pause)*
- Now, having anchored our awareness to the breath to whatever extent we have, allowing your awareness to expand back outwards so that while you are still aware of the breath, you are holding the breath in this more spacious awareness along with a sense of the body as a whole, sitting here, in this moment, breathing. *(Pause)*

And then, when you are ready, gently bringing your awareness back to the room, and just allowing your eyes to open.

4. Band of Light – Body Scan Mindfulness Meditation Script

To begin, find a comfortable place to sit in a room where you won't be disturbed for ten minutes. Take a few slow, long breaths and then close your eyes. Using your imagination, envision a narrow band of white light circling the top of your head like a halo. As this exercise progresses, the band of light will slowly move down your body, and as it does, you will become aware of the different physical sensations you're feeling beneath the band of light.

As you continue to breathe with your eyes closed, continue to see the band of white light encircling the top of your head and notice any physical sensations you feel on that part of your body. Perhaps you will notice your scalp tingling or itching. Whatever sensations you notice are okay.

Slowly the band of light begins to descend around your head, passing over the tops of your ears, your eyes, and the top of your nose. As it does, become aware of any sensations you feel there, even small sensations. Notice any muscle tension you may be feeling on the top of your head. As the band of light slowly descends over your nose, mouth, and chin, continue to focus on any physical sensations you might be feeling there. Pay attention to the back of your head where you may be having sensations notice any sensations you may be feeling in your mouth, on your tongue, or on your teeth.

Continue to watch the band of light in your imagination descend around your neck, and notice any feelings in your throat or any muscle tension on the back of your neck.

Now the band widens and begins to move down your torso, across the width of your shoulders. Notice any sensations, muscle tension, or tingling you might be feeling in your shoulders, upper back, upper arms, and upper chest area.

As the band of light continues to descend down around your arms, notice any feelings you're aware of in your upper arms, elbows, forearms, wrists, hands, and fingers. Become aware of any tingling, itching, or tension you might be holding in those places.

Now become aware of your chest, the middle of your back, the side of your torso, your lower back, and stomach. Again, notice any tension or sensations, no matter how small they might be. As the band continues to move down your lower body, become aware of any sensations in your pelvic region, buttocks, and upper legs. Be sure to pay attention to the backs of your legs and notice any feelings there.

Continue to watch the band of light descend around your lower legs, around your calves, shins, feet, and toes. Notice any feelings or tension you're experiencing.

Then as the band of light disappears after completing its descent, take a few more slow, long breaths, and when you feel comfortable, slowly open your eyes and return your focus to the room.

Phone Apps to Assist With Relaxation

- Smiling Mind
- Calm – meditation and sleep stories
- Insight Timer – mediation for sleep and anxiety
- The Mindfulness App – mediation for everyone
- Stop, Breathe & Think
- ReachOut Breathe

Websites to Help Manage Symptoms of Anxiety, Depression, and Increase Wellbeing

MindSpot Clinic

<http://www.mindspotorg.au>

MoodGYM

<http://www.moodgym.com.au>

myCompass

<http://www.mycompass.org.au>

Quick Relaxation Techniques

Different relaxation techniques appeal to different people. Please try out each technique and rate it out of 10, then choose the one(s) that suit you best.

Whole body tension		Score out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tense everything in your whole body, stay with that tension Hold it as long as you can without feeling pain Slowly release the tension and very gradually feel it leave your body. Repeat three times 		
Imagine air as a cloud		Score out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open your imagination and focus on your breathing As your breathing becomes calm and regular, imagine that the air comes to you as a cloud It fills you and goes out You may imagine the cloud to be a particular colour 		
Pick a spot		Score out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With your head level and body relaxed, pick a spot to focus on (eyes open at this point) When ready, count 3 breaths backward: with each breath allow your eyes to close gradually Concentrate on each breath. When you get to 1, your eyes will be closed. Focus on the feelings of relaxation 		
Counting ten breaths back		Score out of 10
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allow yourself to be passive and indifferent, counting each breath slowly from 10 to 1 With each count, allow yourself to feel heavier and more relaxed With each exhale, allow the tension to leave your body 		
Transformations: pick one that works or make up your own		Score out of 10
When you think of images like.....	Imagine.....	
Tightly twisted ropes	The twisted ropes untwisting	
Feel of cold, harsh win	The cold wind becoming warm and soft	
Hard, cold wax	The wax softens and melts	
Tense, red muscles	The red muscles soften and lighten to pink	
Affirmations: pick one that works or make up your own		Score out of 10
Breathe deeply and slowly....	This discomfort will pass..... let it go	
Let the tension flow away....	I have the power to handle this	
I am calm & relaxed, ready for anything	Relax the jaw, lower the shoulders	