

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE I – DEEP BREATHING

Once you've become aware of stress, it's time to relax! There are many techniques for relaxing (and no one method is better than another), but the most basic is deep breathing. One of the body's automatic reactions to stress is rapid, shallow breathing. Breathing slowly and deeply is one of the ways you can "turn off" your stress reaction and "turn on" your relaxation response.

The Basic Technique

Deep breathing is a simple technique that is basic to most other relaxation skills. By inhaling deeply and allowing your lungs to breathe in as much oxygen as possible, you can begin to relieve the tension that can lead to negative stress. And, best of all, deep breathing can be done anywhere and at any time. Try to practice deep breathing for a few minutes three or four times a day, or whenever you begin to feel tense.



Inhale

Sit or stand (using good posture) and place your hands **firmly** and comfortably on your stomach. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, letting your stomach expand as much as possible. Many people are "backward breathers" - they tend to tighten their stomachs when breathing in. By placing your hands on your stomach, you can actually feel when you are breathing properly. When you've breathed in as much as possible, hold your breath for a few seconds before exhaling.

Exhale

With your hands on your stomach, exhale slowly through your mouth, pursing your lips as if you were going to whistle. By pursing your lips, you can control how fast you exhale and keep your airways open as long as possible. As you exhale, your stomach deflates, while the large muscle under your lungs (the diaphragm) expands. When your lungs feel "empty," begin the inhale-exhale cycle again. Try to repeat this cycle three or four times at each session.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE II – CLEARING YOUR MIND

Another relaxation technique that can help reduce stress is "clearing your mind." Since your stress response is a physical and emotional interaction, giving yourself a mental "break" can help relax your body as well. When you clear your mind, you try to concentrate on one pleasant thought, word, or image and let the rest of your worries slip away.

The Basic Technique

Clearing your mind forms the basis for other relaxation techniques such as meditation. The principle of clearing your mind is really quite simple—by allowing yourself to mentally focus on a single, peaceful word, thought, or image, you can create a feeling of deep relaxation. Clearing your mind helps you take a mental and physical retreat from the "outside world," and helps balance the stress of everyday life.



Reduce distractions, noise, and interruptions as much as possible as you begin this exercise. Try to set aside 5-10 minutes daily to practice clearing your mind.



Sit comfortably, loosen any tight clothing, kick off your shoes, and relax yourself. Then, close your eyes and begin to breathe slowly and deeply as shown on page 8.



Mentally focus on one peaceful word, thought, or image. If other thoughts should enter your mind, don't be discouraged—relax, breathe deeply, and try again.



Stretch and exhale as you complete the exercise. With practice, clearing your mind can help you feel refreshed, energetic, and ready to tackle the next challenge!

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE III – AUTOGENICS

Yet another relaxation technique is autogenic training. If you've ever heard the expression "mind over matter," then you may already have a basic idea of what autogenic training is all about. By giving yourself mental "cues," you can literally tell your body how to feel, and produce the relaxation response whenever you feel tense or under stress.

The Basic Technique

Autogenics is a progressive technique. You begin by concentrating on a mental suggestion such as, "My left arm feels heavy and warm." As you concentrate on this 'command,' **try** to actually feel your arm getting heavier and warmer. Then repeat the same command, focusing on your right arm, left leg, right leg, and so on. Try to practice this exercise for about ten minutes, twice a day, or whenever you feel stressed.



Sit comfortably, loosen any tight clothing, close your eyes, and try to clear your mind. You may wish to breathe deeply for a few moments and repeat a peaceful suggestion such as, "I feel quiet," "My mind is at rest," or something similar.



Mentally focus on your left arm and repeat to yourself "My left arm feels warm and heavy," until it begins to feel warmer and heavier. Then try the same command, focusing on your right arm, left leg, right leg, and so on, until you feel completely relaxed.



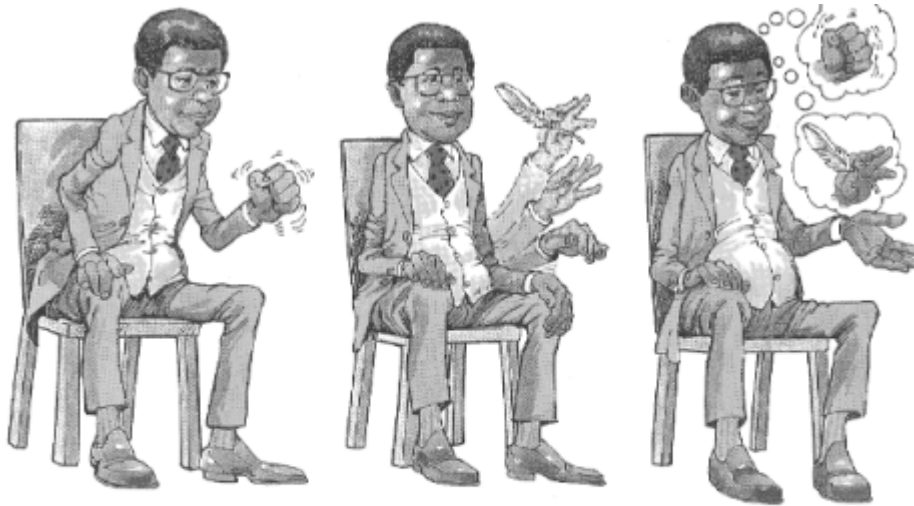
Breathe deeply and stretch as you finish the exercise. Open your eyes, exhale slowly, and notice how you feel. As you become better and better at this technique, you'll be able to help your body relax anywhere, at any time.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE IV – PROGRESSIVE MUSCULAR

The techniques described up until now are most helpful for people who know what relaxation feels like, but who may not know how to concentrate on relaxing. But what if you are so "geared-up" that you're not even sure how it feels to relax? Progressive muscular relaxation is a technique that can help you actually feel the difference between tension and relaxation.

The Basic Technique

Progressive muscular relaxation is a three-step technique. First, you tense a muscle and notice how it feels; then, you release the tension and pay attention to that feeling; and finally, you concentrate on the difference between the two sensations. This exercise can be done while sitting or lying down, and only takes about fifteen minutes. It helps if you can practice the technique in a quiet, relaxing atmosphere.



Tighten your hand muscle and make a fist; then, notice how it feels. Your muscles are taut and strained, and your hand may even be trembling slightly. You may feel tension in your hand, wrist, and lower arm. Hold the tension for a few seconds before relaxing.

Release your hand, relax your fist, and let the tension slip away. You may notice that your hand feels lighter than it did while your muscle was tensed, and that your wrist and forearm also feel relieved of pressure.

Notice the difference between how your hand felt when tensed and how it felt when you released the tension. Does your hand tingle or feel warm when relaxed? Did the throbbing you felt when tense disappear when you relaxed?

Progression of the Technique

It is most helpful to try this exercise on each of the major muscle groups of your body. The basic technique remains the same for each group: tighten the muscle, release the tension, then notice the difference. You can start with your hands, then progress to other muscles, or you can begin the exercise moving from "head-to-toe" tightening and relaxing the muscles in your face, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, stomach, legs and feet.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE V – STRETCHING

One of your automatic physical responses to stress is muscle tension. A simple, easy way to loosen up tight muscles and combat stress is to do stretching exercises. The following exercises only take a few minutes and can be done at home or at work during a break.



Back Stretch. While sitting, stretch forward, rest your body on your lap, and relax your head and neck. Hold for about a minute, then press on your thighs to help yourself sit back up.



Neck Stretch. While standing or sitting, slowly tilt your head to the right without moving your shoulders, and then slowly tilt your head to the left. Repeat 5 times toward each side.



Shoulder and Arm Stretch. Hold your hands together with fingers interlaced and stretch overhead with palms upward. Hold about 30 seconds, relax, and repeat 5 times.



Passive Back Stretch. Lie on the floor with your legs on a chair as shown. Relax, pressing your lower back onto the floor. Rest in this position for several minutes.



Leg Stretch. With one foot on a support, slowly lean forward. Bend from your hips, and keep your back straight. Repeat the stretch 5 times on each leg.



Upper Body Stretch. With your feet comfortably apart, reach overhead and stretch to the side. (Try not to move your hips.) Hold for 30 seconds, then switch sides.

RELAXATION TECHNIQUE VI – OTHER TECHNIQUES

As you probably have guessed by now, there are a number of techniques that can help you balance stress with relaxation. No other technique is better than another – use whatever works for you. Here are a few others.



Visualization

Earlier, we said clearing your mind was a sort of "mental retreat." Well, visualization can be thought of as a mental vacations license to daydream! You can produce feelings of relaxation simply by using your imagination. Unlike clearing your mind, where you try to focus on one single image, visualization allows your imagination to run free. Try to visualize yourself feeling warm, calm, and relaxed. Picture a tranquil setting that has particular appeal to you and try to imagine all of the details. Are you lying on a warm beach? How does the sun feel on your back? Do you hear waves lapping on the sand? Is there a fragrance in the air? Do you see sailboats on the water? Just by using your imagination, you can give yourself a mental vacation whenever (and wherever) you feel the need to take a moment to relax and enjoy life.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback, on the other hand, is not a "go - anywhere" technique. If you are having difficulty zeroing in on your reaction to stress and your ability to relax, biofeedback may be able to help. Certified biofeedback practitioners (or their assistants) show you how to listen to signals from your own body that indicate your level of stress or relaxation. External sensors placed on your body measure specific stress responses (such as perspiration and muscle tension), and translate these responses into signals you can see or hear such as meters, lights, or audible tones. Your challenge is to change these physical responses through relaxation, which then alters the signal. Biofeedback can help you monitor the progress you are making in helping your body to relax, and is often used together with other relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, autogenics, progressive relaxation, and visualization.