



Relaxation techniques

What are relaxation techniques?

Our fast-paced society often causes people to push their minds and bodies to the limit, often at the expense of physical and mental well-being. Relaxation techniques are helpful tools for coping with stress and promoting long-term health by slowing down the body and quieting the mind. Such techniques generally entail: refocusing attention (by, for example, noticing areas of tension); increasing body awareness; and exercises (such as meditation) to connect the body and mind together. Used daily, these practices can over time lead to a healthier perspective on stressful circumstances.

How do relaxation techniques work?

When we become stressed, our bodies engage in something called the "fight or flight response." The fight or flight response refers to changes that occur in the body when it prepares to either fight or run. These changes include increased heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing, and a 300 to 400 percent increase in the amount of blood being pumped to the muscles.

However, we also possess the opposite of the fight or flight response—the "relaxation response." These changes include decreased blood pressure, heart rate, muscle tension, and rate of breathing, as well as feelings of being calm and in control. Learning the relaxation response helps to counter the ill effects of the fight or flight response and, over time, allow the development of a greater state of alertness. The relaxation response can be developed through a number of techniques, including meditation and progressive muscle relaxation. It is now a recommended treatment for many stress-related disorders.

What are relaxation techniques good for?

Research suggests that meditation can help improve a person's quality of life and reduce stress hormone levels. Studies also show that relaxation techniques reduce the perception of pain. One study found that among patients undergoing colorectal surgery, those who listened to guided-imagery tapes before, during, and after the operation had less pain and needed fewer pain medications than those who did not.

In general, studies show that with consistent practice, relaxation techniques can potentially reduce symptoms or improve outcomes in the following conditions:

- premenstrual syndrome
- pain
- irritable bowel syndrome
- anxiety
- infertility
- high blood pressure
- panic disorders
- chronic tension headaches
- fibromyalgia
- insomnia
- psoriasis
- arthritis

It is extremely important that usual medical care and advice be followed for these conditions as well. Relaxation techniques are meant to complement usual medical care.

Can I learn relaxation techniques by myself?

If you want to generally reduce stress and enhance well-being, you can teach yourself some relaxation techniques. Look for videotapes and audiobooks on popular techniques such as guided imagery and meditation, and check for community classes in your area. The Q-active team will also be able to teach you some of the 'quick fixes' listed overleaf as well as longer techniques.

Quick Relaxation Techniques

As you become more experienced with how the body relaxes, some quick methods of relaxation may be useful. Below are several "quick-release" techniques which can be done almost anywhere and only take a couple of minutes. First, here are some pointers that apply to all the exercises that follow:

- Get as comfortable as possible. You can do these exercises while waiting in check-out lines, at stop lights, in the doctor's office in the midst of studying or taking test, on the loo, while waiting for some who is late. It is not necessary to lie down to do them.
- Remain passive. Just watch your mind work. Whatever thoughts come to mind are okay. Do not work at it, just let it happen.
- Take note of all sounds in the environment and let them pass.
- Focus inward on breathing as a natural, easy process.
- Do these regularly and they might become automatic after awhile. But, learning to master stress is like learning any other skills - practice, practice, practice.
- So, take 10 or 15 seconds every hour or so and do it - even if you have to tie a proverbial string around your finger as a reminder

Quickie Relaxer

1. Close your eyes and draw your attention and concentration inward.
2. Smile inwardly with your mouth and eyes.
3. Say to yourself "Alert mind. calm body."
4. As you exhale, let your jaw, tongue, and shoulders go limp.
5. Feel a wave of warmth and heaviness sweep down to your toes.
6. Enjoy the feeling of peace and relaxation that this brings.
7. Open your eyes and resume normal activities.

Really Fast Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- While seated, tense yourself all over, a part at time.
- Pull your toes up to tense some of your leg muscles,
- tense your thighs,
- your buttocks,
- take a deep breath and hold it,
- tense your arms and fists, your jaw,
- close your eyes tightly.
- Hold it for 5 seconds, then let go all at once, and feel the tension leave your system.

Breathing Your Tensions Away

Gently focus your attention on your feet.

- As you take in a slow, deep breath,
- imagine collecting all the tensions in your feet and legs,
- breathing them into your lungs and
- expelling them as you exhale.

Then, with a second deep breath,

- imagine collecting all the tensions in your trunk, hands and arms,
- expel that tension.

With a third one,

- collect and expel all the tensions in your shoulders, neck and head
- expel that tension.

Note: With practice, some persons are able to collect tensions in the entire body in one deep inhalation and expel them.

Shoulder shrug

- Try to raise your shoulders up to your eyes.
- Hold for the count of four.
- Now drop your shoulders back to a normal position.
- Repeat three times.

Shoulder rotation

- Rotate your shoulders back, down and around, first one way, then the other.
- Do one shoulder, then the other.
- Now do both at the same time.

Note: This is also good for back, arms, and neck.