



Relaxation Techniques

Using the Relaxation Response to Relieve Stress



For many of us, relaxation means zoning out in front of the TV at the end of a stressful day. But this does little to reduce the damaging effects of stress. To effectively combat stress, we need to activate the body's natural relaxation response. You can do this by practicing relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, meditation, rhythmic exercise, and yoga. Fitting these activities into your life can help reduce everyday stress and boost your energy and mood.

What is the relaxation response (and why is it so powerful)?

When stress overwhelms your nervous system your body is flooded with chemicals that prepare you for "fight or flight." While the stress response can be lifesaving in emergency situations where you need to act quickly, it wears your body down when constantly activated by the stresses of everyday life.

No one can avoid all stress, but you can counteract it by learning how to produce the *relaxation response*, a state of deep rest that is the polar opposite of the stress response. The relaxation response puts the brakes on stress and brings your body and mind back into a state of equilibrium. The goal is to be both physically relaxed and mentally alert at the same time.

When the relaxation response is activated:

- ▶ Your heart rate slows down

- ▶ Breathing becomes slower and deeper
- ▶ Blood pressure drops or stabilizes
- ▶ Your muscles relax
- ▶ Blood flow to the brain increases

In addition to its calming physical effects, the relaxation response also increases energy and focus, combats illness, relieves aches and pains, heightens problem-solving abilities, and boosts motivation and productivity. Best of all, anyone can reap these benefits with regular practice.

Passive relaxing does not produce the relaxation response

The relaxation response is a mentally active process best done when you're awake, and strengthened by practice. Simply laying on the couch, reading, or watching TV—while possibly relaxing—aren't going to produce the physical and psychological benefits of the relaxation response.

For that, you'll need to practice a relaxation technique. Those whose stress-busting benefits have been widely studied include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation, visualization, rhythmic exercise, yoga, and tai chi.

Finding the relaxation technique that's best for you

There is no single relaxation technique that is best for everyone. When choosing a relaxation technique, consider your specific needs, preferences, fitness, and the way you tend to react to stress. The right relaxation technique is the one that resonates with you and fits your lifestyle. If and is able to focus your mind and interrupt your everyday thoughts in order to elicit the relaxation response. In many cases, you may find that alternating or combining different techniques will keep you motivated and provide you with the best results.

How you react to stress may influence the relaxation technique that works best for you:

The “fight” response. If you tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that quiet you down, such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing, or guided imagery.

The “flight” response. If you tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress, you will respond best to stress relief activities that are stimulating and energize your nervous system, such as rhythmic exercise, massage, mindfulness, or power yoga.

The immobilization response. If you've experienced some type of trauma and tend to "freeze" or become "stuck" under stress, your challenge is to first rouse your nervous system to a fight or flight response (above) so you can employ the applicable stress relief techniques. To do this, choose physical activity that engages both your arms and legs, such as running, dancing, or tai chi, and perform it mindfully, focusing on the sensations in your limbs as you move.

Do you need alone time or social stimulation?

If you crave solitude, solo relaxation techniques such as meditation or progressive muscle relaxation will help to quiet your mind and recharge your batteries. If you crave social interaction, a class setting will give you the stimulation and support you're looking for. Practicing with others may also help you stay motivated.

Starting a regular relaxation practice

Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques isn't difficult. But it takes practice to truly harness their stress-relieving power: daily practice, in fact. Most stress experts recommend setting aside at least 10 to 20 minutes a day for your relaxation practice. If you'd like to maximize the benefits, aim for 30 minutes to an hour.

Tips for making relaxation techniques part of your life

Set aside time in your daily schedule. If possible, schedule a set time either once or twice a day for your practice. You may find that it's easier to stick with your practice if you do it first thing in the morning, before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.

Don't practice when you're sleepy. These techniques are so relaxing that they can make you very sleepy. However, you will get the most benefit if you practice when you're fully awake and alert. Avoid practicing close to bedtime, after a heavy meal, or when you've been drinking.

Expect ups and downs. Don't be discouraged if you skip a few days or even a few weeks. It happens. Just get started again and slowly build up to your old momentum.

If you exercise, improve the relaxation benefits by adopting mindfulness. Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, try focusing your attention on your body. If you're resistance training, for example, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.

Don't think you have time for a daily practice?

If you feel like your schedule is already too packed for anything else, remember that many relaxation techniques can be practiced while you're doing other things.

- Meditate while commuting to work on a bus or train, for example, or waiting for an appointment.
- Try deep breathing during your break at work or when you're winding down for bed.
- Take a yoga or tai chi break in your office or in the park at lunchtime.
- Practice mindful walking while exercising your dog, walking to your car, or taking a neighborhood stroll.

Deep breathing

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple yet powerful relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

How to practice deep breathing

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- ▶ Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- ▶ Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- ▶ Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- ▶ Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale. Breathing techniques can be practiced almost anywhere and can be combined with other relaxation exercises, such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind.

You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

Practicing progressive muscle relaxation

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face.

1. Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
2. Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
3. When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
4. Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
5. Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
6. Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
7. When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
8. Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
9. It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Before practicing progressive muscle relaxation, consult with your doctor if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other serious injuries that may be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Progressive muscle relaxation sequence

1. Right foot, then left foot
2. Right calf, then left calf
3. Right thigh, then left thigh
4. Hips and buttocks
5. Stomach
6. Chest
7. Back
8. Right arm and hand, then left arm and hand
9. Neck and shoulders
10. Face

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness is the quality of being fully engaged in the present moment, without analyzing or otherwise “over-thinking” the experience. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness meditation switches the focus to what’s happening right now.

[Meditations that cultivate mindfulness](/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm) (/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm) have long been used to reduce stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions. Some of these meditations bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words, or the flickering light of a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations. Mindfulness can also be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, or eating.

A basic mindfulness exercise:

1. Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
2. Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.

3. Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and your ideas.
4. Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.

Practicing mindfulness meditation

To practice mindfulness meditation, you'll need:

- **A quiet environment.** Choose a secluded place in your home, office, or outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.
- **A comfortable position.** Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.
- **A point of focus.** You can meditate with your eyes closed or open so this point can be internal—a feeling or imaginary scene—or external—a flame, an object in your surroundings, or a meaningful word or phrase that you repeat throughout the meditation.
- **An observant, noncritical attitude.** Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don't fight them, just gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

Body scan meditation

Body scanning is a type of meditation that cultivates mindfulness by focusing your attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, you start with your feet and work your way up. However, instead of tensing and relaxing your muscles, you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels without labeling the sensations as either “good” or “bad”.

Practicing body scan meditation

- ▶ Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and

- ▶ relaxed.
- ▶ Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- ▶ Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- ▶ Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine hovering above yourself.
- ▶ After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.

Rhythmic movement and mindful exercise

The idea of exercising may not sound particularly soothing, but rhythmic exercise that gets you into a flow of repetitive movement can be very relaxing. Examples include:

- ▶ Running
- ▶ Walking
- ▶ Swimming
- ▶ Dancing
- ▶ Rowing
- ▶ Climbing

For maximum stress relief, add mindfulness to your workout

While simply engaging in rhythmic exercise will help you relieve stress, if you add a mindfulness component on top, you'll get even more benefit.

As with meditation, mindful exercise requires being fully engaged in the present moment—paying attention to how your body feels right now, rather than your daily worries or concerns. In order to “turn off” your thoughts, focus on the sensations in your limbs and how your breathing complements your movement.

If you're walking or running, for example, focus on the physicality of each step—the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving, and the feeling of the wind against your face. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return to focusing on your breathing and movement.

Visualization

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that uses the power of your imagination to reach a deep state of relaxation and emotional calm. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen.

You can practice visualization on your own or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. You can also choose to do your visualization in silence or use listening aids, such as soothing music or a sound machine or recording that matches your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Practicing visualization

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Just “looking” at it like you would a photograph is not enough. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible.

For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- ▶ **See** the sun setting over the water
- ▶ **Hear** the birds singing
- ▶ **Smell** the pine trees
- ▶ **Feel** the cool water on your bare feet

- ▶ **Taste** the fresh, clean air

Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present.

Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a visualization session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of heaviness in your limbs, muscle twitches, or yawning. Again, these are normal responses.

Yoga and tai chi

Yoga involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as reducing anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. Practiced regularly, it can also strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life. Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher, or at least following video instructions. Once you've learned the basics, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your practice as you see fit.

What type of yoga is best for stress?

Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing, and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

- **Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga. It features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation, making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone primarily looking for stress reduction.
- **Hatha yoga** is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class.
- **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

Tai chi

If you've ever seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you've probably witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced, non-competitive series of slow, flowing body movements. These movements emphasize concentration, relaxation, and the conscious circulation of vital energy throughout the body. Though tai chi has its roots in martial arts, today it is primarily practiced as a way of calming the mind, conditioning the body, and reducing stress. As in meditation, tai chi practitioners focus on their breathing and keeping their attention in the present moment.

Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and fitness levels, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. As with yoga, tai chi is best learned in a class or from a private instructor. Tai chi classes are often offered in community centers, senior centers, or local community colleges. Once you've learned the basics of tai chi or qi gong, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your sessions as you see fit.

Self-massage

You're probably already aware how much a professional massage at a spa or health club can help reduce stress, relieve pain, and ease muscle tension. What you may not be aware of is that you can experience many of the same benefits at home or work by practicing self-massage—or trading massages with a loved one.

Try taking a few minutes to massage yourself at your desk between tasks, on the couch at the end of a hectic day, or in bed to help you unwind before sleep. To enhance relaxation, you can use aromatic oil, scented lotion, or combine self-massage with mindfulness or deep breathing techniques.

A five-minute self-massage to relieve stress

A combination of strokes works well to relieve muscle tension. Try gentle chops with the edge of your hands or tapping with fingers or cupped palms. Put fingertip pressure on muscle knots. Knead across muscles, and try long, light, gliding strokes. You can apply these strokes to any part of the body that falls easily within your reach. For a short session like this, try focusing on your neck and head:

- Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly

massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides.

- Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples.
- Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

Adapted with permission from *Stress Management: Approaches for Preventing and Reducing Stress* (<http://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/stress-management-approaches-for-preventing-and-reducing-stress>), a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

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