

R e l a x a t i o n

strategies for relaxing your body and mind



At times we all experience unpleasant feelings such as stress, tension, frustration, irritability, anger, anxiety, or worry. These feelings are normal and they have good intentions – they are part of our body’s natural reaction to help us out during difficult or threatening circumstances. However, if these feelings occur very intensely or over long periods of time, they can have negative effects on our psychological and physical health. The relaxation strategies described in this info-sheet have been shown to be effective in reducing these unpleasant feelings.

What are Relaxation Strategies?

When most people think of relaxation they think about watching TV, going shopping or lying in bed reading a book. Whilst these activities are relaxing, this info-sheet is about specific techniques that have a specific, targeted stress-reduction effect. Relaxation strategies refer to specific techniques that can be used to reduce tension in your body and unpleasant emotional sensations. Each of the strategies that are covered here serve slightly different functions.

- **Abdominal Breathing** specifically targets symptoms of hyperventilation that occur when we feel threatened or anxious.
- **Progressive Muscle Relaxation** is mostly used to reduce muscular tension that builds up as a result of emotional distress.
- **Imagery Strategies** are particularly useful for achieving psychological relaxation. These techniques can be used to reduce over-all levels of stress and tension but are especially effective for quick on-the-spot use.

Most people like to use a combination of all three techniques – but you may find only one or two to be helpful for you.

Abdominal Breathing

When we become emotional we often hyperventilate. Hyperventilation causes many of the unpleasant emotions and bodily sensations you may experience. It also interferes with your ability to think clearly. Abdominal breathing is a straightforward but extremely effective technique for reducing hyperventilation.

Full relaxed breathing means that the whole trunk is involved – lungs, diaphragm and abdomen. Many people breathe superficially in their upper chest rather than using their abdomen. Follow this method for deeper, more relaxed and enjoyable breathing.

1. Lie down or sit up straight, and loosen any tight clothing. Put both hands on your abdomen (around your navel area). Breathe through your mouth first for a few breaths to take in more air. (Keep doing it through your mouth if your nose is blocked or if it is harder to breathe through your nose).

2. Now imagine that you are breathing into your hands. Relax your stomach muscles (don't push them in or out). Enjoy the sensations of slow, deep(er) breathing in your belly and chest. Think of your body as an empty container. As you breathe in, begin filling the container from the bottom, then the sides, the middle and finally the top. As you breathe out, relax your chest and keep your abdomen relaxed. Repeat for up to five minutes. Do this whenever you feel tense. Once you have practiced it you can then do it anywhere, at anytime – in bed, waiting in a shop, while you are listening to someone talking, etc.
3. Tips for proper breathing:
 - Breathe SLOWLY – otherwise you will hyperventilate and become dizzy. *A complete breath in and out should take about 6 seconds.* Healthy breathers take approximately 10 breaths every minute.
 - Maintain GOOD POSTURE as you practice deep breathing – this will increase the effectiveness of the technique.
 - Be sure that as you inhale, your abdomen expands first, followed by the lower portion of the chest, then the upper portion – this will ensure complete aeration of your lungs.
 - As you breathe out gently say “*relax*” to yourself. Try gently smiling and closing your eyes as you perform this exercise.
 - Deep breathing is the easiest, yet most overlooked, means of relieving stress. Try it. Practice it. You should find it an effective way to alleviate tension.

Are you over-breathing?

Most people breathe between 10 and 12 breaths a minute or about one breath every 6 seconds. Try counting how many breaths you take in a minute using a stop-watch. Remember that one breath starts when you begin breathing in and ends when you finish breathing out. If you are breathing more or less than the usual rate, this may explain some of the feelings and symptoms you experience. If you are breathing at a normal rate now, try this exercise again when you are feeling stressed or tense and see if there is a difference. If so, that would provide evidence that your breathing plays a role in your emotional state. Abdominal breathing may be an especially useful exercise for you.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

When you become emotional you may experience significant tension in many of your muscle groups. PMR is an effective strategy for reducing this tension throughout your body. By progressively tensing and then relaxing all your muscle groups, you can produce an overall feeling of calm. Before you start, ensure that you are in a quiet place free from any interruptions.

1. Sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes. Use the breathing strategy described above to assist you to breathe slowly and deeply.
2. Concentrate first on your feet. Without moving other parts of your body, curl your toes up tightly for about three seconds and then release. Check your breathing is still controlled. Continue to do this progressively with all muscle groups in your body. Go next to your calf muscles, and then thighs and buttocks.
3. Notice that when your legs are fully relaxed, the only thing holding them up should be the chair or the bed. It almost feels like they are sinking into the floor.
4. Continue with your stomach, chest and shoulders, arms and hands. Ask someone to lift your arm and let it drop like a piece of rag. Notice how it feels to have your body relaxed.

5. Briefly do neck exercises. Stress often produces tightness in the neck that can cause headaches and neck aches. If you have a history of neck problems or severe headaches check with your Doctor before doing neck exercises. Move your head forward and backward, holding it in those positions for three seconds. Move your head from side to side, holding it in each position for a few seconds. Slowly turn your head from side to side to look over each shoulder. The movement of your head should be fluid as you turn it through its range of motion.
6. Finally, tense up the muscles in your face by squinting, grimacing, frowning and so on. Then let your face relax into a neutral position. Check your breathing again. Maintain the relaxed feeling in your muscles.

Imagery Guided Relaxation

We all have memories, images and dreams that make us feel happy and relaxed when we think of them. Imagery guided relaxation can reduce your level of tension by making use of these mental associations.

Imagery is just like something which most of us have done before – daydreaming. Daydreaming was something we did to imagine we were some other place that we wanted to be. The problem was, some of us got in trouble for daydreaming at school because it distracted us from more important matters. But now as an adult it sometimes is appropriate, desirable and necessary to daydream in order to maintain good mental health. We refer to that daydreaming as “imagery”.

Imagery also allows you to take your mind somewhere peaceful and relaxing while your body remains stationary. It is often used to complement other strategies such as Progressive Muscle Relaxation because it helps you to become relaxed. Your body can't remain tense while your mind is relaxed.

1. Get into a comfortable position. Often it is useful to start imagery after your breathing is controlled and your muscles are relaxed. Visualize a tranquil setting; a sun-soaked tropical island, a peaceful meadow covered in wild flowers, a boat on a placid lake, a bubbling mountain stream. Make it a place you have been to before and enjoyed, or someplace you would like to go. It may be a real place or it may be completely imaginary. Choose any setting you wish and let your mind take you there.
2. Once you are able to visualize yourself in this tranquil location, let yourself explore it. Become aware of the sights, sounds, smells and feelings you associate with the place. For example, if you choose a tropical island, feel the warm sun on your face and the sand beneath your feet. Smell the salty air. Listen to the water lapping on the beach and the birds singing. Imagine a gentle breeze blowing in from the sea.

You can stay in this place for as long as you like, however when trying to reduce feelings of tension and stress, 5 minutes of relaxation is often a helpful rule-of-thumb. Once you have visualized a particular tranquil setting, you can visit it again, in your mind, any time you feel the need to relax. Or you can discover new places, whichever helps you to relax.