

Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief

Finding the Relaxation Exercises That Work for You

For many of us relaxation means zoning out in front of the TV at the end of the day or snatching some extra sleep at the weekend. Unfortunately, this does little to help reduce the damaging effects of stress on the mind and body.

To effectively combat stress, we need to activate the body's natural relaxation response. You can do this by practicing relaxation techniques including deep breathing, visualization, meditation, and yoga, or by performing rhythmic exercise, such as running, cycling, or mindful walking. Finding ways to fit these activities into your life can help reduce negative impact of stress and boost your energy and mood. They will also help you to stay calm in the face of adversaries and life's unexpected events.

The relaxation response

Stress is necessary for life. You need stress for creativity, learning, and your very survival. Stress is only harmful when it becomes overwhelming and interrupts the healthy state of equilibrium that your nervous system needs to remain in balance.

When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques can bring it back into a balanced state by producing the *relaxation response*, a state of deep calmness that is the polar opposite of the stress response.

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 instrumental in situations where you need to act quickly, it wears your body down when constantly activated. The relaxation response puts the brakes on this heightened state of readiness and brings your body and mind back into a state of equilibrium.

Producing the relaxation response

A variety of different relaxation techniques can help you bring your nervous system back into balance by producing the relaxation response. The relaxation response is not lying on the couch or sleeping but a mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed, calm, and focused.

Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques is not difficult, but it does take practice. Most experts recommend setting aside **at least** 20 minutes a day for your relaxation practice. If that sounds like a daunting commitment, remember that many of these techniques can be incorporated into your existing daily schedule (eg. practiced at your desk over lunch break).

Finding the relaxation technique that is 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 level, and the way you tend to react to stress. The right relaxation technique is the one that resonates with you, fits your lifestyle, 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 do you react to stress?

Stress Response	Symptoms	Suitable Relaxation Techniques
Overexcited	angry, agitated, or keyed up	techniques that quiet you down, such as meditation, deep breathing, or guided imagery
Under excited	depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out	techniques that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system, such as rhythmic exercise
Frozen	You tend to freeze: speeding up in some ways while slowing down in others	techniques that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system, such as mindfulness walking or power yoga

Do you need alone time or social stimulation?

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

Relaxation technique 1: Breathing meditation for stress relief

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It is 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 music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

Practicing deep breathing meditation

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 on the chest 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 from 1 to 4 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. If may wish to listen to soothing music while practicing deep breathing.

Relaxation technique 2: Progressive muscle relaxation for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation involves 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. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box below.

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

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

1. Right foot*	6. Left thigh	11. Right arm and hand
2. Left foot	7. Hips and buttocks	12. Left arm and hand
3. Right calf	8. Stomach	13. Neck and shoulders
4. Left calf	9. Chest	14. Face
5. Right thigh	10. Back	

** If you are left-handed you may want to begin with your left foot instead.*

Relaxation technique 3: Body scan meditation for stress relief

A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body.

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 yourself 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.

Relaxation technique 4: Mindfulness for stress relief

Mindfulness is the ability to remain aware of how you are feeling right now, your “moment-to-moment” experience—both internal and external. Thinking about the past or worrying about the future can often lead to a degree of stress that is overwhelming. But by staying calm and focused in the present moment, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.

Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce overwhelming stress. 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 flickering light from a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations.

Practicing mindfulness meditation

- ◆ A quiet environment. Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great 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. This point can be internal – a feeling or sensation from a body part – or something external – a flame or meaningful word or phrase that you repeat it throughout your session. You may meditate with eyes open or closed. Also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.
- ◆ An observant, noncritical attitude. Don’t worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you are doing. When thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don’t fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

Mindful listening

- ◆ Find a comfortable position either lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting down, make sure that you keep your back straight and release the tension in your shoulders (let them drop).
- ◆ Close your eyes.

- ◆ Begin by focusing your attention on your breathing. Simply pay attention to what it feels like in your body to slowly breathe in and out. Spend a few minutes focusing your attention on the full experience of breathing. Immerse yourself completely in this experience. Imagine you are "riding the waves" of your own breathing.
- ◆ Once you have spent some time focusing on your breathing, shift your awareness to your ears. Then, allow this awareness to expand from your ears and become aware of and open to all the sounds in your environment.
- ◆ Practice simply being open to all sounds where ever they arise. Do not go searching for sounds or holding on to the experience of certain sounds. Instead, just practice having an expansive awareness of all the sounds around you -- sounds that are close, sounds that are far away, sounds that are soft, and sounds that are loud.
- ◆ Practice connecting with the sounds. Notice if you are labeling the sounds that you hear (for example, the "tick-tock" I hear is from the clock on my wall). If you are labeling the sounds you hear, recognize this and then recommit to connecting with the experience of hearing and the quality of the sound (for example, how loud it is or how long it lasts).
- ◆ Anytime that you notice that you are getting distracted by a thought (this is completely normal), notice what took you away from the present moment and bring your attention back to the sounds in your environment.
- ◆ After a few minutes, shift your attention back to your breathing. When you are ready, open your eyes.

Mindful eating

- ◆ Choose a time and place for eating that promotes mindful eating. Try eating in a quiet, distraction-free environment. This means no eating in front of the television.
- ◆ Before you begin eating, look down at your food. Take in what it looks like, how it smells, and think about where it came from. See if you can notice the urge to eat (e.g., your mouth watering, the feeling of hunger), before you take a bite.
- ◆ Put a bite in your mouth. Notice how the food feels in your mouth and what it tastes like. Before you swallow, notice the things that happen in your mouth when you put food in. Notice how you salivate, notice the urge to swallow, notice the sensation of chewing.
- ◆ As you swallow your food, notice what that feels like. How does your stomach feel now that it is one bite fuller?
- ◆ Repeat your mindful eating for each bite until your meal is finished. Try to decide when the meal is finished based on the sensations in your body (e.g., the feeling of fullness in your belly, no more sensation of hunger) rather than on whether your plate is clean.

Beginners mind

- ◆ Look around your bedroom and find one object that you have had for a long time -- something that is very familiar to you. It may be a wall hanging, book, plant, or even a piece of clothing.
- ◆ Sit down somewhere you can view the object you have chosen, close your eyes (if this feels comfortable), and take a few deep breaths. Set your intention to cultivate beginner's mind.
- ◆ Open your eyes and look at the object you have chosen. Imagine you are from Mars and have never seen anything like it before. Really look at the object without judging it.
- ◆ Notice the unique qualities of the object. What does it look like? What does it feel like? Where does it catch shadows or reflect light?
- ◆ Continue to really examine the object. Do you notice anything about it that you hadn't noticed before?
- ◆ When you are done looking at the object, reflect on this exercise. Did you learn anything new about the object you chose? What would it mean if we were able to approach everything in our

lives with beginner's mind? Are there objects, people, or situations that you tend to react to "automatically," as if you already know what they are?

Mindfulness of thought

- ◆ Find a comfortable position either lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting down, make sure that you keep your back straight and release the tension in your shoulders. Let them drop.
- ◆ Close your eyes.
- ◆ Begin by focusing your attention on your breathing. Simply pay attention to what it feels like in your body to slowly breathe in and out. Spend a few minutes focusing your attention on the full experience of breathing. Immerse yourself completely in this experience. Imagine you are "riding the waves" of your own breathing.
- ◆ Once you have spent some time focusing on your breathing, shift your attention to your thoughts. Bring awareness to whatever thoughts enter your mind.
- ◆ Try to view your thoughts as simply thoughts -- only objects in or events of your mind. It may be useful to imagine your thoughts as simply clouds passing through the sky or leaves passing down a stream. Notice them enter your consciousness, develop, and then float away. There is no need to seek out, hold onto, or follow your thoughts. Just let them arise and disappear on their own.
- ◆ Anytime that you notice that you are getting immersed in a thought (this is completely normal), notice what took you away from your "observer stance" and bring your attention back to having awareness of your thoughts.
- ◆ After a few minutes, shift your attention back to your breathing, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

Tips:

- Before you try this exercise, it may be useful to first practice mindful awareness of your breathing.
- Make this a habit. Practice everyday.
- At first, practice this exercise with thoughts that are not upsetting. Once you feel comfortable, practice this exercise with other thoughts.
- You are going to get caught up in your thoughts from time to time. Try not to get discouraged -- this is completely normal, and noticing this is being mindful. When you get caught up in your thoughts, remind yourself that this is natural and bring your attention back to simply observing your thoughts.

Relaxation technique 5: Visualization meditation for stress relief

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that requires you to employ not only your visual sense, but also your sense of taste, touch, smell, and sound. 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 is a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music, or an audio recording of a therapist guiding you through the imagery. To help you employ your sense of hearing you can download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Practicing visualization

Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up or standing.

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, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you; don't select images because someone else suggests them, or because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you.

If you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake, for example:

- ◆ Walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you.
- ◆ Spend some time exploring each of your senses.
- ◆ 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 guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements, or even cough or yawn. Again, these are normal responses.

Relaxation technique 6: Yoga and tai chi for stress relief

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. It is best to learn yoga by attending group classes or following video instructions.

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 and anyone primarily looking for stress reduction.
- Hatha yoga is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners.
- Power yoga, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

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 levels of fitness, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. Like yoga, 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.

How to Practice Yoga and Tai Chi

The popular relaxation techniques of yoga and tai chi benefit from training that helps ensure you are correctly performing the poses and movements.

Making relaxation techniques a part of your life

The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is to incorporate it into your daily routine. Between work, family, school, and other commitments, though, it can be tough for many people to find the time. Fortunately, many of the techniques can be practiced while you are doing other things.

Rhythmic exercise as a mindfulness relaxation technique

Rhythmic exercise—such as running, walking, rowing, or cycling—is most effective at relieving stress when performed with relaxation in mind. As with meditation, mindfulness requires being fully engaged in the present moment, focusing your mind on how your body feels right now. As you exercise, focus on the physicality of your body’s movement and how your breathing complements that movement. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return to focusing on your breathing and movement.

If walking or running, for example, focus on 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.

Tips for fitting relaxation techniques into your life

- ◆ If possible, schedule a set time to practice each day. Set aside one or two periods each day. You may find that it is easier to stick with your practice if you do it first thing in the morning, before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.
- ◆ Practice relaxation techniques while you are doing other things. Try deep breathing while you are doing housework or non-engaging office work. Mindfulness walking can be done while walking to the office, or climbing the stairs at work. Once you have learned techniques such as tai chi, you can practice them in your office, balcony, room or even bathroom.
- ◆ 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 are doing resistance training, such as weigh lifting, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.
- ◆ Avoid practicing when you are sleepy. These techniques can relax you so much that they can make you very sleepy, especially if it is close to bedtime. You will get the most benefit if you practice when you’re fully awake and alert. Do not practice after eating a heavy meal or while using drugs, tobacco, or alcohol.
- ◆ 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.

Sources:

*Helpgude and Harvard Health Publications
The Headington Institute*