

## Techniques to Relax and Reduce Stress

To a certain degree, feeling stressed is a normal, healthy response to life's events and challenges. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. However, prolonged stress can have adverse effects on your health and general well-being. Learning to reduce the amount of stress that you experience can improve your outlook and help you respond to new situations more positively.

Try the following techniques to help you relax and reduce stress.

### Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is an exercise that can be used to quickly relieve stress and tension by promoting an efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs. When we breathe from our chests or shoulders, we can create more tension and stress by preventing air from reaching the bottom of our lungs, increasing blood pressure and preparing the body for action. Deep breathing focuses on using the diaphragm (the spot just under your rib cage) to draw slow, deep breaths of air into the lungs.

To practice deep breathing, use the following steps:

1. Begin by lying down position, making sure that you are comfortable and that your posture is good. You can place a small pillow under the small of your back if necessary.
2. Inhale slowly through your nostrils while counting to four. Concentrate on using your abdominal muscles to draw in the air.
3. Exhale slowly and evenly through your mouth while counting to four.
4. Repeat this process for as long as it takes to relieve the tension in your body.

Once you have mastered deep breathing, try practicing the technique while sitting or standing. Eventually, you will be able to use deep breathing throughout the day with little effort.

Keep the following tips in mind when using the deep breathing technique:

- Keep your chest and shoulders relatively still, and focus on using your abdomen.
- Concentrate on thinking peaceful, calming thoughts.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothes if possible.
- Take your time; two minutes a day can make a world of difference in your stress levels.

This technique not only relieves stress, it helps with concentration and energy levels, relaxation and mood improvement.

### Stretching and Yoga

When we experience stress, we usually will notice tension in our necks, shoulders and head. This area is commonly referred to as the stress triangle. Stretching exercises can relieve tension, make your body more limber and flexible and producing an overall calming effect. Yoga is a more formal method of stretching and may require extra time and space. However, there are many stretching exercises that you can perform throughout the day while standing in line or sitting at your desk.

Try the following stretches to help relieve the tension associated with stress:

- **Shoulder shrug:** While sitting or standing, raise your shoulders up toward your ears until you feel a stretch in your back. Hold the stretch for a few seconds, and then slowly lower your shoulders. Repeat this stretch as many times as necessary throughout the day.
- **Arm stretch** Interlace your fingers, and then slowly raise your arms above your head, with your palms facing up. Push up as far as you can, and hold for 10 seconds. Lower your arms and repeat.
- **Neck roll:** Relax your shoulders and let your head roll forward until your chin is resting on your chest. Slowly rotate your head in a gentle circle, taking care to avoid straining your neck. Repeat this exercise, and then reverse the direction of the circle.
- **Full body stretch:** While standing, reach up toward the ceiling, stretching all of your muscles at the same time.

## Massage

Massage offers a number of physical and mental benefits. Physically, massage can help alleviate tense muscles, lower blood pressure, promote deep breathing and improve posture. Some of the mental benefits of massage include reduced anxiety, increased body awareness and enhanced creativity. Massage can also help to satisfy the basic human need for touch.

Many beauty salons or health spas offer massages as part of their services. Check with your local salon for the types of massages that are offered. You may also want to talk to your doctor to discuss therapeutic massage.

Massage does not always have to be an expensive stress-reducing option. You can use self-massage any time you feel stress at home or at work.

## Meditation and Visualization

Meditation involves “quieting the mind” by blocking out all forms of sensory input and distraction, while visualization involves using the brain’s creative capacity to create a stress-free experience, much like daydreaming. Both meditation and visualization can be helpful in relieving stress and do not require any formal training.

By sitting in a comfortable and quiet environment, closing your eyes, and freeing your mind from its many concerns for even a few minutes each day, you can learn to achieve relaxation quickly. Try concentrating on an image that symbolizes your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; alternatively, let your mind go blank.

When practicing meditation or visualization, do not fight stressful thoughts. Resisting these thoughts is like telling yourself not to think of the color red. Instead, think of these thoughts as floating in one ear and out of the other and being replaced in your mind by calmer images.

## Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualizing each major muscle group. It is best to practice these techniques when you have about 20 minutes and are able to find a quiet place where you can lie down without being disturbed. You may want to play some soft music or relaxation tapes while practicing this technique.

To practice muscle relaxation, do the following:

1. Lie down in a quiet, comfortable area. Close your eyes and breathe slow, deep breaths.
2. Starting at your feet, contract and relax the muscles of your body. Start by moving up your body to the top of your head, and then reverse direction back down to your feet.
3. While relaxing each muscle group, visualize the tension escaping your body.

4. When you are finished, take a few moments to enjoy the feeling of a tension-free body. Continue taking slow, deep breaths until you are ready to resume your day.

You can do a mini version of this exercise at stress-filled times throughout the day if you begin to feel tension in your muscles.

## Calming Thoughts

Our thought patterns often cause or contribute to the stress that we are feeling. Learning to listen to your inner voice is the first step in recognizing negative thought patterns. If you are experiencing high levels of stress, chances are that your thought patterns include a sense that you are not in control.

The next time you encounter a stressful situation, take a moment to tune into the thoughts and feelings that you are experiencing. Write these thoughts down if they are particularly negative, and then write down a more positive replacement. If you need to, you can always revisit the list of thoughts when you anticipate being in a stressful situation.

## Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health: [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- U.S. National Library of Medicine: [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov)

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