

RELAXATION:

Benefits & Tips

The goal of relaxation is to reduce the effects of stress on your health. Since chronic pain produces chronic stress on the body, it is important to regularly practice relaxation techniques that can help your mind and body recover. Relaxation is more than resting or enjoying a hobby – it involves using specific strategies to reduce tension.

Benefits of Relaxation

Relaxation is important for good health. When you are relaxed, your muscles are loose, your heart rate is normal, and your breathing is slow and deep. Learning how to relax can help especially when you feel pain. Relaxation prompts your body to release chemicals that reduce pain and produce a sense of well-being.

Relaxation won't cure pain or other chronic symptoms, but skills that relax the body and the mind may help decrease muscle tension, prevent muscle spasms, and relieve the stress that can aggravate pain and other symptoms.

Taking time to relax and refuel your energy provides benefits such as:

- Improved mood
- Increased energy and productivity
- Improved concentration and focus
- Improved sense of control over stress and daily demands
- Improved nighttime sleep
- Increased self-confidence
- Greater ability to handle problems
- Decreased anxiety and other negative emotions such as anger and frustration
- Increased blood flow to muscles and reduced muscle tension
- Lower blood pressure, breathing rate, and heart rate
- Decreased pain, such as headaches and back pain

Relaxation Practice Tips

Relaxation is a skill that requires practice. You may not feel the benefits immediately, so don't give up! Remain patient and motivated and you'll reduce the negative impacts of stress. And remember: If relaxation feels foreign or unnatural, that likely means you are a person who needs it most!

Establish a routine

- Set aside time to practice relaxation at least once or twice a day.
- Pairing relaxation with a regular activity may help you remember to practice (for example, take 10 relaxed breaths before bed or whenever you sit down to eat).
- Practice at various times throughout the day until relaxation becomes natural and you can use it readily when you feel stressed. You may want to leave "reminders" for yourself to relax (for example, sticky notes on the bathroom mirror, kitchen cabinets, or car dashboard with the words "relax" or "breathe").

Be comfortable

- Practice on a comfortable chair, sofa, mat, or bed. Dim the lights.
- Loosen tight clothing and remove shoes, belt, glasses or contact lenses, if you like.

Concentrate

- Eliminate disruptions. Turn off the TV, radio, or telephone. Practice in a quiet, calm, environment.
- Close your eyes to reduce distractions and improve concentration. If you prefer, keep your eyes open and focus on one spot.

- Move your body as little as possible, changing positions only for comfort.
- Don't worry if you have some distracting thoughts—it happens to everyone. Just notice that your thoughts have wandered and then gently, without judgment, return your attention to your breath.

Relax

- Begin and end relaxation practices with relaxed breathing techniques.
- Use a relaxation CD if it helps. Gradually, learn to relax without a CD so that you can use relaxation techniques anywhere.
- Let relaxation proceed naturally and spread throughout your body. Do not try to resist it.

Be patient

- Give yourself time to learn relaxation skills. Practice is required for these techniques to become automatic.
- Try not to become upset if you have trouble concentrating. A wandering mind is normal and expected. Keep bringing your attention back to your breath.
- Don't worry about how well you are practicing.
- After a few weeks, select a word, such as “calm,” “relax,” “peace,” or “patience” that you can say during relaxation practices. Eventually, simply saying that word may help you relax.

Incorporate relaxation into daily life

- Over time, move relaxation practices from planned, quiet settings to “real life.” The goal is to be able to calm yourself when necessary, no matter where you are.
- Use relaxation whenever you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious, such as waiting in line, at a doctor's appointment, or during a difficult meeting.

DEEP BREATHING

First, start by becoming aware of your breathing... Place one hand on your abdomen at the waistline and the other hand on the center of your chest. Without trying to change anything, simply notice how you are breathing. Notice *where* you are breathing from... whether your shoulders are rising and falling, whether your chest is rising and falling, or perhaps your belly is rising and falling. Notice how your hands move as you breathe... (PAUSE)

Now notice the rate of your breathing. Are you breathing rapidly or slowly? Are you breathing deeply or more shallow? (PAUSE)

Now as you slowly inhale, imagine the air flowing deeper into your belly. Feel your belly fill with air as your lower hand rises. Pause at the top of your breath, and then follow your breath out as you completely exhale... Slowly take a breath in... 2, 3, 4... and slowly exhale... 2, 3, 4. Let any tension melt away as you relax more deeply with each breath... (PAUSE)

Notice how the air feels, as cool fresh air enters your nose, passes through the little hairs in your nasal passage, reaches the back of your throat, and descends deep into your lungs. Notice what happens as that breath of fresh air enters your lungs. Notice what happens when you exhale. Feel the temperature of each breath, cool as you inhale, and warm as you exhale. Count your breaths as you breathe in and out.

Notice your breath becoming smooth and slow. Feel your belly and ribcage expand outward with each breath... and feel yourself become more relaxed with each exhale. Allow your shoulders to become heavier with each exhale... (PAUSE 15 sec)

Continue breathing slowly and gently... (PAUSE 15 sec)

As you breathe, notice the cool temperature of the air, as it enters your nose or mouth. Notice how the air becomes warmer as you follow it deep into your belly and out through your mouth.

Continue breathing slowly and gently... (PAUSE 15 sec)

Again, slowly take a breath in... 2, 3, 4... and slowly exhale... 2, 3, 4. Feel yourself become more and more relaxed with each exhale... (PAUSE 15 sec)

(Skip if going on to other relaxation exercises)

Now, as I count from 5 to 1, feel yourself become more alert... 5 bringing your attention to this room... 4 feeling calm and relaxed... 3 start to wiggle your fingers and toes... 2 slowly start to move and stretch your muscles... 1 open your eyes, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

First, build up the tension in the **lower arms**, by making fists with your hands and pulling your fists up by bending the wrists. Feel the tension through the lower arms, wrists, fingers, knuckles, and hands. Focus on the tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now release the tension. Let your hands and lower arms relax onto the chair or bed beside you. Focus your attention on the relaxing sensations in your hands and arms. Feel the release from tension as you relax the muscles fully, feel it get warm... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Now build up the tension in the **upper arms** by pulling the arms back and in toward your sides. Feel the tension in the back of the arms and radiating towards the shoulders and into the back. Focus on the tension. Hold this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now, release the arms and let them relax – almost feeling heavy at your sides. Notice the difference between the prior feelings of tension and the new feelings of relaxation. Your arms might feel heavy, warm, and relaxed... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Now bring your attention to your **lower legs**. Build up the tension by flexing your feet and pulling your toes toward your upper body. Feel the tension as it spreads through your feet, ankles, shins, and calves. Hold this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

And release all of the tension in your lower legs. Let your legs relax onto the chair or bed. Feel the difference in these muscles as they relax. Feel the release from tension, the sense of comfort, the heaviness of relaxation... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your **upper legs and buttocks** by pressing your knees together and lifting the legs slightly off of the bed or chair. Focus on the tightness through the front of your thighs and buttocks. Hold this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now release all of the tension in your upper legs. Let your legs sink heavily into the chair or bed. Let all of the tension disappear as your legs sink heavier into the chair or bed. Focus on the feeling of relaxation and comfort... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your abdomen by pulling your **abdomen** in toward your spine, very tightly. Feel the tightness and focus on this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now let the tension in the abdomen relax... Notice how smooth and calm your breathing has become. Feel the comfort of relaxation... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your **chest** by taking in a deep breath and holding it. Your chest is expanded and the muscles are stretched around your chest. Feel the tension in your front and your back... (PAUSE 3-5 sec)

Now, slowly let the air escape and resume normal breathing, letting air flow in and out smoothly and easily. Feel the difference in sensations as the muscles relax, compared to those of tension... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your **neck and shoulders** by pulling your shoulder blades back and up towards your ears. Feel the tension around your shoulders, radiating into your neck and back. Hold this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now release the tension. Let your shoulders drop down, sinking further and further until they are completely relaxed. Notice the difference in the previous feelings of tension and the new feelings of relaxation. Enjoy these feelings... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your **mouth, jaw and throat** by clenching your teeth and turning the corners of your mouth back into a forced smile. Hold. Feel the tightness... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now, release the tension. Let your jaw drop down and the muscles around your throat and jaw relax. Notice the difference between the feelings of tension and the feelings of relaxation... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Now, build up the tension around your **eyes and lower forehead**, by squeezing your eyes tightly shut and pulling your eyebrows down... hold this tension (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now release all the tension in your eyes and lower forehead. Let the tension disappear from around your eyes. Feel your forehead and eyes smooth. Feel the difference as the muscles relax... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Build up the tension in your **upper forehead and scalp** by raising your eyebrows as high as possible. Feel the wrinkling and pulling across the forehead and top of the head. Hold this tension... (PAUSE 5 sec)

Now release all the tension in your forehead, letting the eyebrows gently rest down. Focus on the sensations of relaxation... (PAUSE 10 sec)

Your whole body is feeling relaxed and calm. Scan your body for any last bits of tension and if you notice any, let that tension go. Enjoy the feelings of relaxation...

As I count from 1 to 5, feel yourself become more and more relaxed... 1 ... let all tension leave your body... 2 ... sinking further and further into relaxation... 3 ... feel more and more relaxed... 4 ... feel very relaxed... 5 ...deeply relaxed... (PAUSE 30 sec)

As you spend a few minutes in this relaxed state, think about your breathing. Feel the cool air as you breathe in and the warm air as you breathe out. Your breathing is smooth and regular. Every time you breathe out, think to yourself “relax... relax ... relax”... you are feeling comfortable and relaxed... (PAUSE 1-3 min)

(Skip if going on to other relaxation exercises)

Now, as I count from 5 to 1, feel yourself become more alert... 5, bringing your attention to this room... 4, feeling calm and relaxed... 3, start to wiggle your fingers and toes... 2, slowly start to move and stretch your muscles... 1, open your eyes, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

GUIDED IMAGERY

Imagine yourself walking slowly down a path toward your special place. This path can be inside or outside. The path is comforting and peaceful. As you walk down this path, imagine all of your stresses, worries, and tension are leaving you. Enjoy this journey to your special place.

As you walk down this path, notice the ground beneath you...how it feels as you walk. Notice the sounds...the comfortable temperature of the air. Take a breath in, feeling all your tension leave you as you exhale. Notice any fragrance that may be here. Notice the view around you. Reach out and touch something around you. Feel its textures...

You feel calm and safe. All your worries and anxieties being left behind as you move toward your special place...
(PAUSE 30 sec)

Walk down this path until you arrive at your own special place...and when you have reached this special place, go ahead and enter... (PAUSE 10 sec)

You have arrived at this relaxing and peaceful place. Notice the ground underneath you... whether it is hard or soft. Notice how the ground feels below your feet. Listen to the sounds in this place, both close and distant. Smell the air, the fragrances. Notice the temperature of the air around you.

Look above you... Notice the colors and sights above you. Look out into the distance... as far as you can see... Take in all of the sights, fragrances, and sounds around you.

Reach out and touch something in this place... Notice it's texture and how it feels against your skin. Notice the different objects around you... their shapes, textures, and colors. Notice the light and shade of this place and how it reflects off of these objects.

There is a comfortable place for you to sit or lie here as you take in all the smells, sounds, sights, and textures... As you sit or lie in this place, away from it all, you feel calm and secure, refreshed and renewed, strong and at peace. As you enjoy this place for a few minutes, you know that you can come here whenever you please, and that this place will always be waiting for you...
(PAUSE 3-5 min)

Now it's time to come back... leave by the same way you came, enjoying the path... and as you return on this path, you start to also notice the room in which you are sitting... start to wiggle your fingers and toes... and when you are ready, slowly open your eyes and stretch your muscles.

RELAXATION PRACTICE RECORD

Use this record to chart your relaxation practice over time. Before you begin your practice, use the scale below to rate your level of tension. After you complete the practice, use the same scale again to rate your level of tension. Note any differences. Remember, it may take a number of sessions before you notice improvement.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Totally Relaxed		Very Relaxed		Slightly Relaxed		Slightly Tense		Moderately Tense		Extremely Tense

Date	How long did you practice? (minutes)	Level of tension before practice (0-10)	Level of tension after practice (0-10)