

Relaxation Techniques

Using relaxation techniques can be very helpful in coping with stress. Three types of relaxation techniques are described below:

- Relaxed breathing
- Muscle relaxation
- Imagining a peaceful scene

Relaxation techniques are most effective when they are practiced on a regular basis. When you are first learning a technique, you usually concentrate on doing the steps according to the instructions. As you become familiar with the instructions, you will be able to concentrate more on the relaxation you are experiencing. Choose one of the following techniques and try practicing it daily. After a week, evaluate whether you think the technique is effective for you.

Relaxed Breathing

The goal of this exercise is to slow down your breathing, especially your exhaling:

Steps:

- Choose a word that you associate with relaxation, such as CALM or RELAX or PEACEFUL.
- Inhale through your nose and exhale slowly through your mouth. Take normal breaths, not deep ones.
- While you exhale, say the relaxing word you have chosen. Say it very slowly, like this, “c-a-a-a-a-a-l-m” or “r-e-e-e-l-a-a-a-x.”
- Pause after exhaling before taking your next breath. If it’s not too distracting, count to four before inhaling each new breath.
- Repeat the entire sequence 10 to 15 times

Muscle Relaxation

The goal of this technique is to gently stretch your muscles to reduce stiffness and tension. The exercises start at your head and work down to your feet. You can do these exercises while sitting in a chair.

Steps:

- *Shoulder shrugs.* Lift both shoulders in a shrugging motion. Try to touch your ears with your shoulders. Let your shoulders drop down after each shrug. Repeat 3-5 times.
- *Overhead arm stretches*.* Raise both arms straight above your head. Interlace your fingers, like you're making a basket, with your palms facing down (towards the floor). Stretch your arms towards the ceiling. Then, keeping your fingers interlaced, rotate your palms to face upwards (towards the ceiling). Stretch towards the ceiling. Repeat 3-5 times.
- *Stomach tension.* Pull your stomach muscles toward your back as tight as you can tolerate. Feel the tension and hold on to it for ten seconds. Then let go of the muscles and let your stomach relax, further and further. Then focus on the release from the tension. Notice the heavy yet comfortable sensation in your stomach.
- *Knee raises.* Reach down and grab your right knee with one or both hands. Pull your knee up towards your chest (as close to your chest as is comfortable). Hold your knee there for a few seconds, before returning your foot to the floor. Reach down and grab your left knee with one or both hands and bring it up towards your chest. Hold it there for a few seconds. Repeat the sequence 3-5 times.
- *Foot and ankle rolls.* Lift your feet and stretch your legs out. Rotate your ankles and feet, 3-5 times in one direction, then 3-5 times in the other direction.

*If it is not comfortable to do step #2 with your arms overhead, try it with your arms reaching out in front of you.

Imagining a Peaceful Scene

The goal of this technique is to “take yourself away” from stress and picture yourself in a more relaxed, calm situation.

Steps:

1. Choose a scene that you find peaceful, calm and restful. If you have trouble thinking of a scene, consider the following:
 - at the beach
 - on a walk in the woods
 - on a park bench
 - on a mountain path
 - in a canoe or sailboat
 - in a meadow
 - traveling on a train
 - in a cabin
 - beside a river
 - next to a waterfall
 - in a high rise apartment overlooking a large city
 - riding a bicycle
 - on a farm
2. After choosing a peaceful scene, imagine as many details as possible, using all your senses.
3. What does the scene look like? What are the colors? Is it light or dark? What shapes are in the scene? If it's a nature scene, what kinds of trees or flowers do you see? What animals? If it's a city scene, what kind of buildings? What kind of vehicles?
4. What sounds are in your peaceful scene? Can you hear water or the sounds of waves? Are there sounds from animals or birds? From the breeze? From people?
5. What could you feel with your sense of touch? Are there textures? Is it cool or warm? Can you feel a breeze?
6. What smells are there in your peaceful scene? Could you smell flowers? The smell of the ocean? The smell of food cooking?
7. Disregard any stressful thoughts and keep your attention on the peaceful scene.
8. Allow at least five minutes for this relaxation technique.