

Relaxation Skills



There are many ways to relax. The three methods discussed here are among the simplest and most beneficial: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response.

Relaxation has many benefits. It can help you feel better, think more clearly, and relieve unwanted symptoms of stress, such as headaches and tight muscles. Whether you want to take a break from a stressful day or better manage your stress for the long-term, a regular practice of relaxation can be very effective in returning to a calmer state.

There are many ways to relax. The three methods discussed here are among the simplest and most beneficial: deep breathing,

progressive muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response.

When learning these skills, it is important to remove yourself from all outside distractions. Try to practice once or twice a day for 10 to 20 minutes per session. Although it may take two to three weeks to fully develop these skills, once you've trained your mind and body to relax, you'll be able to produce the same relaxed feelings on the spur of the moment.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing can bring about a feeling of calm when it is purposefully done. It can help you let go of stress and worries and focus quietly on the present moment.

Technique

Place both hands on the lower part of your stomach and breathe in so that the incoming air expands your belly and gently pushes against your hands. Your stomach muscles should be relaxed. Then, gently push with your hands as you exhale slowly. If you prefer, imagine a balloon in your stomach that inflates when you inhale and deflates when you exhale. Practice this several times. Finally, breathe in and then try to imagine the tension and stress leaving your body as you exhale while mentally saying to yourself, "I am becoming more and more relaxed and calm."

Here are some important tips for practicing this skill:

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and find a quiet, relaxing place to practice.
- Start practicing for just one to two minutes. Slowly increase your practice time up to five minutes. Practice several times a day.
- In the beginning, you might find it helpful to practice deep breathing while lying down on your bed or on the floor. Lie on your back, bend your knees and place your feet comfortably apart.
- If you feel light-headed, dizzy, or anxious, you may be breathing too deeply or too quickly. If this happens, stop practicing for a moment and breathe normally until the symptoms pass. Also, inhaling and exhaling through your nose can help prevent hyperventilation.
- As you progress, practice deep breathing in a variety of settings (e.g., sitting at your desk, waiting in line, or watching television).
- Be patient and gentle with yourself.

Progressive muscle relaxation

The body responds to tense thoughts or situations with muscle tension, which can cause pain or discomfort. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and releasing each



muscle group to create a deeper sense of relaxation. It can reduce muscle tension as well as general mental anxiety. You can use a prerecorded tape to help you go through all the muscle groups or you can follow the instructions below. Progressive muscle relaxation is effective in combating stress-related health problems and often helps people get to sleep.

Note: If you have fibromyalgia or myofascial pain syndrome, check with your medical professional before practicing progressive muscle relaxation.

Muscle groups and procedure

Pick a place where you can stretch out comfortably, such as on a pad or carpeted floor. Tense each muscle group for 4 to 10 seconds (hard, but not to the point of cramping). Then release the muscle and give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax. Try to relax each muscle group a little more each time you do this exercise.

How to tense muscle groups

- Hands: Clench them.
- Wrists and forearms: Extend them and bend hands back at the wrist.
- Biceps and upper arms: Clench hands into fists, bend arms at elbows, and flex biceps.
- Shoulders: Shrug them.
- Forehead: Wrinkle it into a deep frown.
- Around the eyes and bridge of the nose: Close eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove contact lenses

before beginning this exercise.)

- Cheeks and jaws: Grin from ear to ear.
- Around the mouth: Press lips together tightly.
- Back of the neck: Press head back against the pad or supporting surface.
- Front of the neck: Touch the chin to the chest.
- Chest: Take a deep breath and hold it, then exhale.
- Back: Arch the back up and away from support surface.
- Stomach: Suck stomach into a tight knot.
- Hips and buttocks: Press the buttocks together tightly.
- Thighs: Clench hard.
- Lower legs: Point toes toward face, as if trying to bring toes up to touch head.
- Lower legs: Point toes away and curl toes downward at the same time.

Relaxation response

The relaxation response slows the heart rate and breathing, lowers blood pressure, and helps relieve muscle tension. In this way it can help you slow down, reduce stressful feelings and refocus your thoughts.

Technique (adapted from Herbert Benson, MD):

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position with eyes closed.
- Become aware of your breathing. Breathing slow and steady, concentrate on breathing from

your abdomen and not from your chest.

- With each exhalation, say the word “one” (or any other word or phrase) silently or aloud. As an option, instead of focusing on a repeated word, you may choose to fix your gaze on a stationary object. Any mental stimulus will help you to shift your mind away from distracting thoughts.
- Continue this for 10 to 20 minutes. As distracting thoughts enter your mind, don’t dwell on them. Just allow them to drift away.
- Sit quietly for several minutes until you are ready to open your eyes.
- Notice the difference in your breathing and your pulse rate.

Don’t worry whether you are successful in becoming deeply relaxed. The key to this exercise is to remain passive, to let distracting thoughts slip away like waves on the beach.

Practice for 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day, but not within two hours after a meal. When you have set up a routine, the relaxation response should come with little effort.

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility’s Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor.