

relaxation

How to let go of tension and improve your health



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WHY IS RELAXATION IMPORTANT?

Relaxation is a process that decreases the effects of stress on our minds and bodies. Stress is cumulative and when we don't take enough time away from work, everyday responsibilities and demands, our stress may build up leading to an increase in physical or psychological tension.

When stress and resultant tension build up in our bodies and minds it can begin to impact on our ability to carry on with our normal activities. We may begin to experience increases in feelings of: frustration, irritability, anxiety, being overwhelmed, anger and nervousness. We may also notice increases in physical symptoms such as: headaches, backaches, digestive complaints, fatigue, muscle tension, chronic pain, reduced blood flow to muscles, blood pressure and heart rate. Finally, we may notice impacts on our thinking such as: unpleasant obsessive thoughts, difficulties with concentration and attention, decreased confidence, procrastination and increased worry.

We do not want to eliminate all stress from our lives. Some stress can have a positive effect that helps us remain alert and motivated. However, if we are carrying a build-up of stress in our minds and bodies, we might find that we are feeling constant tension when there is no need to be alert and all tasks have been completed. Relaxation helps us to let go of tension, reduce stress and improve overall health.

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RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

In order to benefit from relaxation techniques we need to actively participate and set aside time for the practice of relaxation. Achieving deep levels of relaxation requires patience and practice. Relaxation techniques involve increasing the awareness of your body whilst simultaneously inducing calmness. Common relaxation techniques include:

- Using visual imagery and body awareness through picturing a tranquil scene whilst focusing on your breath. The aim is to slow your breathing, heart rate and increase awareness of your body and physical sensations.
- Massage.
- Yoga.
- Tai Chi.
- Mindfulness (Paying attention to the present moment, not getting lost in your head).
- Recreation e.g. fishing, sport, knitting, art and craft.
- Meditation.
- Progressive muscle relaxation, a common technique that is easy to learn and described in step by step detail over the page.

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PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

According to the World Health Organisation, the two main principles of progressive muscle relaxation are to:

1. Purposely tense the muscles in order to recognise the feeling of tension.
2. Relax the muscles letting the tension flow out of the body.

Commit to practicing this exercise for approximately 20 minutes.

Firstly, it is important to find a quiet place free from distractions. Sit in a supportive, straight-backed chair, with feet flat on the floor, hands resting in the lap and eyes closed. Take a deep breath in and slowly exhale, repeat this three times and then continue with slow inhalations and exhalations while completing the exercise. For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7-10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds. Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of experiencing pain). Tense and relax in the following order:

Hands – curl hands into fists, then *relax*.

Lower arms – bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then *relax*.

Upper arms – tighten your biceps by bending your arm at the elbow, then *relax*.

Shoulders – lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then *relax*.

Neck – stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then *relax*.

Forehead and scalp – raise your eyebrows, then *relax*.

Eyes – screw up your eyes, then *relax*.

Jaw – clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then *relax*.

Tongue – press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then *relax*.

Chest – breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breath out and *relax*.

Stomach – push your stomach out to tighten the muscles, then *relax*.

Upper back – pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then *relax*.

Lower back – while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc to tense the lower back, then *relax*.

Buttocks – tighten your buttocks, then *relax*.

Thighs – while sitting, push your feet firmly into the floor, then *relax*.

Calves – lift your toes off the ground towards your shins, then *relax*.

Feet – gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then *relax*.

Sit still for a few minutes and enjoy the feeling of relaxation!



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