

RELAXATION

INTRODUCTION

Ways of deeply and deliberately relaxing yourself have been used to promote health and to quiet the body and mind for thousands of years. Yoga, and many other forms of meditation evolved in eastern countries in part as methods to optimize health.

Since the 1930's in the United States scientists and physicians have begun to study the far-reaching effects of these practices. Several things are now clear: we have the ability to create very "quiet" states of mind and body which are very comfortable as well as healthy. We have within us the "antidote" to the stress and distress so many of us feel in our lives.

What follows is a brief introduction to five techniques, or styles of relaxation. Understand that what is meant by relaxation is not recreation, or simply "kicking back" and taking the day off. Nor does it mean any kind of sleepy, half-alert state. The relaxation skill produces a calm, alert, observant resting state, using particular methods.

SLOW-PACED ABDOMINAL BREATHING

This is something you can practice anywhere. In fact, for the best effect, you *should* practice it anywhere, 10-15 times a day, for one or two minutes at a time. Once learned, the method is very simple and very natural to use. To learn it, follow the instructions below:

Place one hand on your solar plexus, right below the point at which your ribs come together in front. As you breath, try to produce movement here. It will feel like your stomach pushes out a little as you breath in. Use this movement while you are learning this method to help you track your breathing.

Breathe in to the slow count of four (one-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-one thousand), then breath out at the same slow count.

Pacing your breath this way will give you about six breaths per minute, which will produce relaxation within minutes.

If you feel lightheaded or dizzy after a few minutes, breath less deeply—you are hyperventilating. If you feel you need more air, use the same slow pace, but breath in a little more air with each breath.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

This method was developed by Edmond Jacobson, a Chicago physician. Jacobson found the method useful in a wide range of medical problems, including high blood pressure. Excess tension complicates or even contributes to many diseases.

The main idea is to tense one muscle group at a time, study the feelings of tension, then relax the muscles, and carefully study the sensations of relaxation. Observe the whole pattern, and take your time: relax at least 20 seconds after each tensing.

Create as little muscle tension as is necessary for you to be able to observe the difference between tension and relaxation.

As you progress you will notice that you become more and more sensitive, or aware, of small amounts of unnecessary muscle tension. Your ability to switch off the tension will also increase as you practice.

Practice once or even twice a day, taking about 15-20 minutes to work through your entire body this way. Pay particular attention to areas of your body where you often carry tension.

1. Shins and calves: flex feet; point toes
2. Thighs and hamstrings: lift feet; heels down
3. Buttocks
4. Lower abdomen: tense by lifting knees
5. Abdomen: pull in; push out; make hard
6. Deep breath and hold it
7. Arch back: lower; upper
8. Shoulders: lift up; down; forward; backward
9. Forearms: flex; extend
10. Upper arms: push wrist down
11. Neck: push head back into chair; pull head in like turtle
12. Face: clench jaw
open mouth wide
close eyes tightly, then relax and leave them closed
frown
lift eyes as if surprised
keep eyes closed and look up, then down, then left, then right

Check through your whole body several times during this sequence and release any tension that has crept back in.

MEDITATION WITH A WORD

This is based on a very old method called mantra yoga. Recent research has shown that repeating a word over and over again for 15 or 20 minutes usually produces a quieting or “relaxation response”.

Select a word or short phrase that is personally meaningful to you. The word “one” works just fine, and so does “tranquility”. If you are a religious person, you may want to use a word or phrase that has religious meaning for you.

Start by arranging a quiet time and place. Sit comfortably upright and begin repeating the word to yourself. Adjust the rate of repetition until it feels right—you want to sense your own rhythm in this. The rhythm may be in sync with your breathing, or it may be faster or slower than that.

After a little while, you will notice that you have become distracted, that your mind has wandered off from what you were doing. You may find yourself thinking, planning, picturing, remembering. When this happens, simply be glad you noticed it, and gently return to repeating the word or phrase you chose.

MEDITATION WITH YOUR BREATHING

Twenty or more minutes can be spent in this exercise each day. This practice is done in a relaxed sitting posture.

This is very similar to meditation with a word. Here, however, you simply rest your attention on your breath. Do not attempt to control your breath, just notice all the details of each inhale and exhale.

Feel the air go in cool, and come out slightly warmed and more moist. Notice the movements of your chest and abdomen, and notice that some breaths are deeper, others more shallow, some quicker, some slower.

Observe the process.

Again, your mind will wander. Thoughts will occur. When this happens, gently return your attention to your breathing. Avoid struggling to push thoughts away. Just withdraw your attention from them, and return it to the process of your breathing.

For occasional variety, you may want to return your attention to the feelings in your body where you contact the surface on which you sit. Try to feel where you end and the chair begins. Notice the feeling of gravity. Try feeling where you end and the air begins. Notice the whole surface of your body. Then return your attention to your breathing.

RELAXING WITH IMAGERY

Recall a time and a place in which you have been very comfortable, at ease, and enjoying yourself.

See the scene unfold in your memory, in your mind's eye. Notice the scenery in detail, the colors, the surroundings.

Observe the surface you are on in this memory. Notice the texture, the hardness or softness.

Recall the sounds, the smells, the temperature of the air, the season of the year.

Enjoy it!

A FINAL NOTE

During deep relaxation, you may experience many sensations. Warmth, coolness, heaviness, lightness, heat, tingling, slow spinning, and many other feelings have been reported. This is normal!

Occasionally, memories or even upsetting thoughts may come to the surface during deep relaxation. This is also normal. You can usually just return your attention to the relaxation method you are using. Occasionally, you may want to return to your normal activities instead. You may even get valuable insights during these periods.