

RELAXATION

Have you ever felt very stressed about something and a well-intentioned person said to you, “Just relax!” It probably made you feel even more frustrated because not being able to relax was part of the problem.

It is easy to recognize that you need to relax but when you are under a lot of stress, it is very hard to do. This occurs because your body’s reaction to stresses is a physiological mobilization that prepares you for action, movement, alertness, and vigilance. It creates a state of readiness that is virtually opposite to a relaxed state. When a stress finally ends, or when the stress is ongoing or chronic, it can be very difficult to turn off this mobilization. For this reason, a variety of techniques and methods have been developed to assist you to relax. No one method is better than another and you will need to try different approaches to see what works best for you. Several techniques that often work are described below:

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

This is a step-by-step procedure that involves alternatively tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups. By systematically fatiguing the muscles, as well as letting you experience the contrast between tension and relaxation, you will find that your body begins to relax. If you practice this method regularly, you will find that you can “recall” the sensation of relaxation more readily and will be able to reinstate relaxation using a shortened version of this exercise. A complete version and a shortened version are included in this handout.

GUIDED IMAGERY

In this method you imagine yourself in a restful, relaxing scene. Clearing your mind of your stresses by focusing on a particular positive image typically helps drain off the tension state and replaces it with a calmer relaxation. An example of guided imagery is included here, although many different ones exist and some scenes may be more calming to you than others. You may find it helpful to imagine your own scene. Tell yourself to imagine being in your favorite place to relax. Pay attention to what the place is like. Imagine what it is like to be there, what are the sounds, the sights, the smells, the sensations, etc.

BREATHING AND STRETCHING

You will find it easier to relax if you concentrate on your breathing. Get into a comfortable position (sitting or lying down), breathe in slowly through your nose allowing your abdomen to expand and your lungs to fill up, then breathe out slowly through your nose. Repeat this several times just concentrating on your breathing. You will likely feel added relief from tension if you add some stretching such as the kind of gentle stretching you might do before or after sport. Do not force anything or “bounce” the stretch. Some may find it helpful to practice a particular kind of stretching such as yoga or tai chi.

MEDITATION

You may find relaxation through meditation. This could be the practice of an established form of meditation such as Transcendental Meditation, but it can be as simple as clearing your mind of extraneous thoughts and focusing on a single word or phrase that you choose (a mantra) that you need to repeat to yourself. If outside thoughts intrude, just note this, tell yourself to put those thoughts aside, and return to your mantra.

MUSIC

You probably recognize that listening to music can affect your mood. When you are tense, music may be helpful. Choose something that you like and that is calming and soothing to you. If you get in a comfortable position, practice your deep breathing and listen to a calming piece of music, you will probably feel much more relaxed.

Progressive Relaxation

Instructions for Full Deep Muscle Relaxation

Note: Always begin with a few deep breaths and get into a comfortable position.

Group #1—Hands and Wrists Make your hands into tight fists. Squeeze hard until your knuckles turn white and hold for at least eight seconds (remember, if you're recording or having a friend read the instructions, to pause at this point for at least eight seconds). Now let go. Let all the tightness and pain flow through your fingertips. Feel your fingers and wrists relax and become loose and limp. Notice the difference: when your fists were tightened, you were feeling tension; when you let go, you began to relax. Stay relaxed for at least 15 seconds. Now clench your fists again; feel the tension. Notice the difference between the two feelings.

Group #2—Biceps and Triceps Put your right hand around your left wrist. Now try to pull your left arm in toward your body, but, at the same time, push outward with your right arm. Focus on your lower arms. Feel how tight they are getting. Now relax your arms and feel the difference. Feel the tension flow out through your fingers and disappear. Now repeat the exercise. Notice the difference between the feeling of tension and the feeling of relaxation. Repeat the exercise with your left hand on your right wrist. Again, focus on the tension as you pull your right arm toward your body and push outward with your left arm. Then relax. Feel the tension disappear. Repeat. Now wrap your arms around yourself, as though you were hugging yourself, but instead of hugging, squeeze yourself very hard using your upper arms. Squeeze hard and focus on your biceps. Feel the tension. Now relax and let go. Feel the warmth flow through your arms. Repeat the exercise, first tensing, then relaxing.

Group # 3—Shoulders Reach above yourself; stretch your arms as far as they will go while you stay seated. Feel your shoulder muscles tighten. Then relax, let your arms fall to your sides. Let your shoulders and arms relax. Make them loose and comfortable. Now repeat the exercise. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Group #4—Neck Bend your head downward so that your chin points into your chest. Push your chin hard against your chest. Then return your head to the headrest. Focus on the tension at the front of the neck (the pull on the back of the neck is strain and should be ignored). Now relax. Feel the tension disappear from the front of your neck. Now bend your neck backwards as though you were trying to see the wall behind you. Push the base of your head downward into your back. Feel the tension in the back of your neck (again, ignore the strain in the front of your neck). Now return your head to an upright position. Feel the difference between the tension in the back of your neck and the feeling of relaxation. Now bend your head downwards toward your right shoulder (Don't raise your shoulder); push your right ear downwards toward your shoulder. Feel the tension on the right side of your neck. Then return your head to an upright position and relax. Now bend your head toward your left shoulder. Feel the tension on the left side of your neck. Relax. Repeat all four positions: front, back, right, left. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation in your neck muscles.

Group #5—Tongue and Mouth Put the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth right behind your front teeth. Push hard, until your tongue feels solid, tight and hard. Let your tongue rest naturally in a comfortable position. Once again, push your tongue against the roof of your mouth and then relax. Open your mouth as wide as you can. Feel the tension in your jaw. Now relax. Feel the tension disappear. Repeat this exercise. Now purse your lips together. Tighten your lips together as hard as you can. Then relax. Feel the tension around your mouth disappear. Repeat.

Group #6—Eyes, Nose and Forehead Close your eyes as tightly as possible. Squeeze your eyelids together so that your nose wrinkles up. Keep squeezing. Now relax your eyes and nose. You don't have to open your eyes all the way: just let your eyelids relax until all tightness is gone and they feel very comfortable. Tightly close your eyes again. Then relax. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Focus on your forehead and tense the muscles until you are frowning and your forehead is wrinkled. Now relax. Feel your forehead becoming smooth. Allow the relaxation to spread from your forehead to your scalp. Now frown again and then relax.

Group #7—Back Straighten your arms out from your sides and stretch them backwards as far as they will go. Press your shoulder blades toward the back of the chair and push the center of your body forward. Feel the muscles in your upper back tense. Now let your arms fall to your sides and your shoulders hunch forward. Feel the tension and tightness disappear. Repeat. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Group #8—Stomach Take in a deep breath and suck in your stomach as hard as you can. Try to continue breathing while you hold in your stomach. Try to touch your backbone with the front wall of your stomach. Now let go and relax until all the tightness is gone. Feel the difference between tension and relaxation in your stomach region. Now take a deep breath and push your stomach forward as though you were preparing for a punch in your abdomen. Then relax. Breathe deeply and exhale slowly. Repeat both exercises: pulling in your stomach and then relaxing, and pushing out your stomach and relaxing.

Group #8—Thighs Put your right hand on your left knee. Push your knee upwards and at the same time push down with your hand. Focus on the thigh muscle and push harder with that muscle. Feel the tension in your thigh (you will also feel tension in your arm). Now relax. Repeat the exercise using your left hand and right leg. Feel the tension in your right thigh. Relax. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation. Repeat the exercise for both legs.

Group #10—Calves and Feet With your legs supported (use a footstool if you are not seated in a reclining lounge chair), allow your thighs to remain relaxed while you draw your toes of both feet upward toward your head and tense the calf muscles. If you feel any cramping during this exercise, relax immediately and “shake out” your legs. Now relax. Feel the difference between tension and relaxation. Now point feet downwards and feel the tension of the front of your legs and ankles. Then relax. Once again point the feet upwards and relax. Then point the feet downwards and relax.

Group #11—Toes Now sit up straight in your chair with your feet flat on the floor. Curl your toes downward. Push them into the floor. Now relax. Repeat.

Once you have tensed and relaxed all muscle groups, close your eyes and relax all the muscle groups. When you are ready to get up, open your eyes, stretch your body and slowly rise from the chair.

Instructions for a shortened form of deep muscle relaxation (DMR). The shortened form of DMR reduces the eleven muscle groups to four groups: arms, shoulders and neck; face; back and stomach; lower limbs. Perform each exercise twice.

Instructions for Shortened Form of DMR

Group #1—Arms, Shoulders and Neck Move your arms toward the center of your body and bend both arms at the elbow. Tighten your hands into fists and at the same time tense the muscles in your upper arms and shoulders. Hold for ten seconds and then relax for fifteen to twenty seconds.

Group #2—Face Tense your facial muscles by wrinkling your forehead and pursing your lips. Hold for ten seconds. Then relax for fifteen to twenty seconds.

Group #3—Back and Stomach Take a deep breath and suck in your stomach as hard as possible for eight to ten seconds. Then exhale and relax for fifteen to twenty seconds.

Group #4—Lower limbs With your legs supported on a footrest, straighten both legs. Tense the muscles of your entire leg and pull your toes toward your head (keeping your feet on the stool). Hold for eight to ten seconds and then relax for fifteen to twenty seconds.

Always repeat your cue word to yourself when you exhale during relaxation. Also, end each shortened form practice session by imaging your relaxation scene for one or two minutes.