



Relaxation

Managing stress is greatly helped by relaxation practices which can give peace of mind and enjoyment and can enhance mood, energy, and mental and physical health. Such can help deal with daily life and stresses of being unwell or being in a difficult situation. When stress occurs, our body is flooded with chemicals which initiate a “flight/fight/freeze” response. This is a natural stress response and can be life saving; however, it can wear down one’s health if it occurs too often. Whilst stress is inevitable, having techniques or a relaxation response to cope with it can reinstate balance within oneself.

A good thing about the relaxation techniques below is that they are free, low risk (check with your doctor), and can be performed anywhere. And although they are simple, they do require practice and a bit of discipline too—10 to 20 minutes a day ought to do it, but 30-60 minutes will maximise benefits. Keep patient if effects aren’t felt “fast enough”.

Make it part of your daily schedule. If too busy, some of these can be done when doing other things (e.g., on public transport, washing the dishes); perhaps some things in your daily schedule can be omitted to make room for relaxation practices. TV is great as it can help to zone out, but it doesn’t help to produce the body’s natural relaxation response which will help to:

Relax muscles	Increase energy and focus
Slow heart rate	Relieve aches and pains
Breathe slower and deeper	Increase cognitive skills
Drop blood pressure	Increase motivation and
Increase brain blood flow	productivity

Whilst there are multiple techniques finding the one that’s right for you is key. Examples of techniques include rhythmic movement (e.g., running, cleaning, walking, swimming, climbing), visualization, yoga, tai chi, self massage, but I will briefly outline below Deep Breathing, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Body Scan Meditation, and Mindfulness Meditation.

If you lean towards “fight” response under stress (getting angry, agitated, or keyed up), perhaps activities that will quieten you down will work best, e.g., meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, or deep breathing.

If you lean towards “flight” response under stress (getting depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out) perhaps activities that will stimulate you will work best, e.g., mindfulness, rhythmic exercise, or yoga.



If you lean towards “freeze” response under stress (getting “stuck”), perhaps a physical activity that engages both your arms and legs (to rouse the nervous system) will work best, e.g., running, dancing, or tai chi, and to do so mindfully.



Deep Breathing Relaxation: one of the fundamental and powerful techniques of relaxation; easy and quick to learn, practice, and enhance.

1. Breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much air as possible into the lungs. (Many of us breathe shallow, upper chest only, but breathing deeply increases the oxygen intake which decreases the stress and anxiety.)
2. Sit comfortably with your back straight; one hand on your chest, the other on your stomach.
3. Breathe in through your nose; the hand on your stomach will rise, the other will move very little.
4. Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach will move in as you exhale, the other hand will move very little.
5. Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation: a two step process of tensing then relaxing muscle groups of the body. This enhances knowledge of bodily felt tension (as well as relaxation) and therefore signs of tension. Combine this technique with the breathing technique above. Sit or lie down comfortably; loosen clothing, take off your shoes if ok to do so.

1. Starting at your feet, work your way up to your face, tensing muscles in body area by area.
2. Breathe in and out, slowly (as above) for a few minutes.
3. When ready, shift your attention to your right foot; focus on the way it feels.
4. Slowly tense the muscles in your foot, squeezing tightly. Hold for 10 seconds.
5. Relax your foot. Focus on the tension flowing away, how limp and loose your foot becomes.
6. Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
7. Shift your attention to your left foot. Repeat as with right foot.
8. Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the different muscle groups.
9. It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Body Scan Meditation: a process to focus attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, but without the tensing and relaxing muscles, and instead simply focussing and sensing on the way each part of your body feels, without labelling the sensations as either “good” or “bad”. After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then slowly open your eyes and stretch, if necessary.

Mindfulness Meditation: focuses on the here and now, helping to engage in the present moment instead of worrying about the future or dwelling on the past. Some meditations focus your attention to a single repetitive action, such as breathing or a mantra (e.g., I am loving, loveable, and loved); other meditations focus on following and then releasing internal thoughts or sensations. Mindfulness can also be applied to actions such as eating, exercising, or walking.

1. Find a quiet place to avoid interruption or distraction.
2. Sit on a straight-backed chair.
3. Find a point of focus, such as your breathing—the sensation of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth or your belly rising and falling—or an external focus, such as a candle flame or a meaningful word that you repeat throughout the meditation.
4. Don't worry about distracting thoughts that come to mind or about how you are progressing. If thoughts intrude during the relaxation session, don't fight them, just gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.