Learning to Relax

Most people can gauge how much stress they’re under by the amount of physical and emotional tension they feel. Too much tension can be unhealthy as well as uncomfortable, which is why relaxation is so important. Relaxation provides a way for you to reduce some of the tensions developed as a result of stress—which in turn helps you to function more efficiently.

One of the ways the body copes with the effects of stress is by "powering down" every night when you sleep. During sleep, your body become very relaxed and your heart rate, pulse, respiration, blood pressure and body temperature decrease. This gives your body and mind a chance to renew themselves and allows you to face the next day's stress with a fresh supply of physical and mental vigor. And while relaxation isn't sleep, of course, it does produce many of the same benefits of a good night's sleep:

- Decreased muscle tension
- Lowered blood pressure
- Increased energy
- Improved immune-system functioning
- Reduced edginess or irritability
- Improved concentration

In effect, relaxation does the opposite of what stress does, giving the body a break and helping to counteract many of the long- and short-term physical problems that stress can produce. Relaxation can also be a powerful tool in managing pain. It can help to reduce the muscle tension that often accompanies injury or illness, and can provide a distraction from pain and worry. Finally, even a brief relaxation exercise can provide a quick energy boost or give you a time-out from concentrating on a difficult problem or project. Often, when you return to a challenging problem after a short relaxation break, you're able to focus better and generate new solutions.

Relaxation Tips

Practice

Learning to relax is like learning to play golf: It takes practice to relax, especially if you're used to being under a great deal of stress.

Understand relaxation is part of a healthy life.

Relaxation may sound like another term for goofing off, but it can be beneficial to your health. Research shows relaxation training can help alleviate the symptoms associated with many medical and psychological disorders, including

- High blood pressure
- Chronic and acute pain
- Nausea, vomiting
- Asthma and allergies
- Addiction
- Diabetes
- Insomnia
- Muscle spasms
• Headaches
• Anxiety and phobias
• Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)
• Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

Relax and enjoy life.

Once mastered, many of the benefits of relaxation can be enjoyed with only 15 to 20 minutes of practice per day. And if meditation is a part of your relaxation skills, some believe you may enjoy increased longevity and quality of life.

Ways to Relax

There are many effective ways to practice relaxation, so you might want to try several to see what works best for you. Among the more common methods of relaxation are:

Deep Breathing

One of the simplest relaxation exercises, deep breathing can be used in almost any situation, and no one will know but you. It involves taking slow, deep breaths, breathing from the diaphragm, and exhaling slowly to let the whole body relax a little more with each breath. Most of the relaxation methods below include deep breathing.

Progressive (Deep) Muscle Relaxation

This type of relaxation exercise involves alternately tensing, and then releasing, groups of muscles throughout the body. It's especially useful for those who say they feel tense everywhere, or for those who have trouble telling the difference between what's tense and what's relaxed.

Passive Muscle Relaxation

This is like progressive muscle relaxation, except that the muscles aren't tensed first. You move through each part of your body in turn, focusing on feelings of comfort and relaxation in all the muscles of that area. As you move from head to toe (or vice versa), you allow those feelings of relaxation to deepen and spread.

Meditation

This is a form of relaxation that has been practiced in many cultures for centuries. It involves resting in a comfortable position in a relatively distraction-free environment and focusing your attention on only one thing. This can be a mantra (a word or phrase that you repeat to yourself), a sound (wind, running water), or something visual (a candle flame, a spot on the wall, a pleasing photograph). The goal is to learn to refocus your attention each time you become distracted.

Imagery or Visualization

This involves relaxing while using your imagination to create a visual image of a relaxing, soothing or healing place or thing. Every element in this image—sight, sound, taste, action and texture—is imagined to make it as real as possible.
**Autogenics**

This technique uses verbal commands to lead your body to a more relaxed state. Repeated words or phrases focus on the specific physical responses associated with relaxation. Phrases may refer to feelings of heaviness, warmth, regular heart rhythm or muscle relaxation. Likewise, the phrases may focus on positive psychological concepts or images.

**Self-Hypnosis**

Hypnosis is a deep state of relaxation in which thoughts, suggestions and images can be experienced as real. During self-hypnosis, the body is deeply relaxed and the mind is narrowly focused. It's possible to use hypnosis to alter physiological processes such as pain perception, blood flow, brain wave activity and organ functioning, as well as thoughts, emotions and behaviors.

**Biofeedback**

This uses instruments to monitor and give feedback on physiological responses during relaxation. This is especially helpful in demonstrating the effects of thoughts and actions on physical processes such as heart rate, muscle tension, brain wave activity, blood pressure, respiration or perspiration. Biofeedback does not make you relax—it simply helps provide information about what your body is doing. With this feedback, you can learn to modify your responses through a variety of relaxation strategies.

**FAQs**

**How can I tell which relaxation method is best for me?**

The choice of which relaxation technique to use depends mostly on your own personality and needs. Buy a book or a tape, or take a class. Experiment with a few to see which techniques work best for you.

**When should I relax?**

Any time you're thinking about relaxation, your body is probably sending you a signal that stress is starting to take a toll. You may want to take a relaxation break whenever you become aware of any of the following stress-related symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Decreased concentration
- Stiff or aching muscles
- Increased irritability or impatience
- Headache

**What do I do if my boss catches me doing a relaxation exercise?**

Most supervisors realize employees need occasional breaks, so you can explain that you use yours to do relaxation exercises rather than hang around the water cooler. You also can mention that the exercises improve your mental agility and attitude.

**How can I relax when I have so much on my mind that it's hard to concentrate?**
It's natural at first to have difficulty refocusing your thoughts toward relaxation—especially when you have a lot on your mind. For most of us, relaxation is a skill that takes some practice. When you're learning, try practicing at a time when you're relatively calm and free of major distractions. When distractions do creep in, tell yourself to put them gently aside until your relaxation time is over—you will be better able to handle them afterwards.

**I tried relaxation once or twice and it made me feel anxious. What's up?**

That can happen sometimes. Try using a very structured approach like progressive muscle relaxation. If it's still a problem, you may want to consult a relaxation therapist for advice or training.