



Relaxation Techniques: Try These Steps to Lower Stress

Relaxation techniques can help alleviate stress symptoms and improve your overall quality of life, particularly if you have a chronic illness. Explore relaxation techniques you can do by yourself.

Relaxation techniques help to improve stress management. Relaxation is not only about peace of mind or enjoying a hobby. It is a process that lessens the stressful effects on your mind and body. Different relaxation techniques can help you cope with everyday stress. And these options can help with long-term stress, or stress related to many health problems, such as heart disease and pain.

Whether your stress is out of control or you have already got it tamed, you can benefit from relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques is easy. Relaxation techniques are often free or low-cost and pose negligible risk. You can practice these techniques anywhere.

When faced with everyday jobs and tasks or the demands of an illness, relaxation techniques may not be a main concern in your life. However, that means you might miss how relaxation can benefit your health.

Relaxation techniques can:

- Slow heart rate
- Lower blood pressure
- Slow breathing rate
- Improve digestion
- Control blood sugar levels
- Lessen activity of stress hormones
- Increase blood flow to major muscles
- Ease muscle tension and chronic pain
- Improve focus and mood
- Improve sleep quality
- Lower fatigue
- Lessen anger and frustration
- Boost confidence to handle problems

To get the most benefit, use relaxation techniques along with these other positive coping methods:

- Think positively
- Find humor
- Solve problems
- Manage time and priorities
- Exercise regularly
- Eat a healthy diet
- Get enough sleep
- Spend time outside
- Reach out to supportive family and friends

Mental health professionals and other healthcare professionals can teach many relaxation techniques. But you can also learn some on your own. Relaxation techniques involve focus and awareness. You focus your attention on something that is calming and raises bodily awareness. It does not matter which method you use; what matters is that you find ways to relax that are beneficial.

Relaxation techniques include:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation activity, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to lower stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind that may help you relax and lessen muscle

tension. For example, you may imagine a peaceful setting. Then you can focus on relaxing your breathing or slowing your heart rate.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In progressive muscle relaxation, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. You can become more aware of physical sensations. In one type of progressive muscle relaxation, you start tensing and then relaxing the muscles in your toes. You gradually work your way up to your neck and head. We suggest practicing this technique in a quiet area with limited interruptions. You can also start with your head and neck and work down to your toes. Tense your muscles for about five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.
- **Visualization.** In visualization, you can form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. To practice visualization, try to utilize as many senses as you can, such as smell, sight, sound, and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, think about the ocean smell, the sound of crashing waves, and the feel of the warm sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes and sit in a quiet spot. Aim to focus on the present and think positive thoughts.

Other relaxation techniques may include:

- Deep breathing
- Massage
- Meditation
- Tai chi
- Biofeedback
- Music and art therapy
- Aromatherapy
- Hydrotherapy

As you learn relaxation techniques, you can become more aware of muscle tension and other physical ways your body reacts to stress. Once you know what the stress-response feels like, you can try to do a relaxation technique as soon as you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from getting out of control and reducing your quality of life.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. As with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself. Do not let your effort to try relaxation techniques become a potential stressor.

If one relaxation technique does not work for you, try another one. If none of your efforts seem to work, discuss other options with a healthcare professional.

Also, remember that some people, especially those with serious mental health issues and a history of abuse or trauma, may have feelings of emotional discomfort during some relaxation techniques. Although this is rare, if you have emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you are doing and speak with your healthcare professional or a mental health professional.

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