

A photograph of a young Black couple riding a bicycle together outdoors. The woman is in the driver's seat, and the man is leaning over her shoulder, smiling. They are both wearing blue and white striped shirts. The background is a soft-focus green field.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Relaxation techniques

Together, all the way.SM



The stress we experience on a daily basis isn't usually a risk to our health. In fact, many of us need challenges in life to prevent us from becoming bored. For some people, a lack of challenge can in itself be stressful.

What's important is to understand how each individual copes with the pressures of daily life, and how well they can tolerate additional pressures.

This may come from major life events such as missing out on a promotion, performance management procedures, bereavement, debt, or divorce. Even the "good" life events such as getting married or moving house can put someone under pressure.

If left unchecked, stress can lead to more serious problems and can affect your general health. It can also lead to physical conditions such as anxiety, depression and musculoskeletal issues.

What's important is recognising the point at which you're no longer able to deal with the pressures you're facing. This is when pressure turns into stress and needs attention.

Simple relaxation techniques can be used to help counteract the negative effects of stress.

In addition to calming the physical effects of stress, relaxation also increases energy and focus, combats illness, relieves aches and pains, heightens problem-solving abilities, and boosts motivation and productivity.

Breathing control works because of the connection between mind and body. When you're overanxious, your upper chest tends to take over breathing from your diaphragm just as it does when you run. Body and mind are so interlinked that if your body is behaving like everything's cool, your mind starts assuming everything must be and you wind down. However, this does have some practical implications. Controlling your breathing has an impact on your mental state. Slow, steady breathing reduces arousal levels whereas rapid, chest-dominated breathing raises physiological and mental arousal levels.



Let's start with the basics of breathing for relaxation.

1. DEEP BREATHING

By concentrating on our breathing, deep breathing allows the rest of our body to relax itself. Deep breathing is a great way to relax the body and get everything into synchrony. For this reason, relaxation breathing is an important element of yoga and martial arts. Follow these simple, deep breathing steps:

- › Lie on your back.
- › Slowly relax your body. From the tip of your toes to the top of your head, tensing then consciously relaxing each part of your body.
- › Begin to inhale slowly through your nose if possible. Fill the lower part of your chest first, then the middle and top part of your chest and lungs. Be sure to do this slowly, over 8 to 10 seconds.
- › Hold your breath for a second or two.
- › Then quietly and easily relax and let the air out.
- › Wait a few seconds and repeat this cycle.
- › If you find yourself getting dizzy, then you are overdoing it. Slow down.
- › You can also imagine yourself in a peaceful situation such as beside a warm, gentle ocean. Imagine that you rise on the gentle swells of the water as you inhale and sink down into the waves as you exhale.
- › You can continue this breathing technique for as long as you like until you fall asleep.

2. DIAPHRAGM CONTROL

Your diaphragm is just under your rib cage. It helps your lungs work by going up and down. We rarely use our full lung capacity. Controlling the diaphragm is an important breathing control technique. This exercise is good for learners, because you literally feel yourself breathe. Find somewhere to sit or stand comfortably:

- › Place both hands on your stomach, just below your ribs, with the left and right middle fingers just touching.
- › Breathe deeply and regularly so that your fingertips move apart as you breathe in, and touch again as you breathe out.

3. A BASIC RELAXATION EXERCISE TO TRY:

1. Choose a quiet place where you won't be interrupted.
2. Before you start, do a few gentle stretching exercises to relieve muscular tension.
3. Make yourself comfortable, either sitting or lying down.
4. Start to breathe slowly and deeply, in a calm and effortless way.
5. Gently tense then relax each part of your body, starting with your feet and working your way up to your face and head.
6. Focus on each area, think warmth, heaviness and relaxation.
7. Push away any distracting thoughts to the back of your mind; imagine them floating away.
8. Don't try to relax, simply let go of the tension in your muscles and allow them to become relaxed.
9. Let your mind go empty. Some people find it helpful to visualise a calm, beautiful place such as a garden or meadow. A place that brings you peace and a feeling of well-being.
10. Stay like this for about 20 minutes, then take some deep breaths and open your eyes, but stay sitting or lying for a few moments before you get up.



4. TENSION REDUCING EXERCISE

Basic instructions before you start

Relaxation is the opposite of tension. The following exercise can be a tool for you to use to control tension and enhance relaxation in both your body and your mind. It will probably be most useful to you if you and a friend could record the following exercise and listen to it rather than to just reading and remembering various parts of the exercise.

Read the exercise slowly in a soft comforting voice with pauses to allow the relaxation to occur.

If you do make a recording for yourself, please remember to use it only when you're sitting or lying comfortably at home or where you don't need to be involved in an activity, requiring you to be fully alert. Avoid using the recording while operating any kind of machinery, or whilst driving.

One of the main activities suggested in this exercise involves alternatively tensing and relaxing muscle groups. Put enough tension into the muscles to make them tense, but not enough to cause pain. Feeling pain means that you are tensing too much.

The exercise

Settle back and get as comfortable as you possibly can. Close your eyes gently. Tune in to your breathing. (Pause) Notice its pace and rhythm.

(Pause) Take another breath, a little deeper this time, letting yourself feel completely calm, peaceful, comfortable and relaxed. (Pause)



Now, with the rest of your body feeling more and more comfortable and relaxed, slowly clench your right fist. Clench it tighter and tighter and study the tension. Keep it clenched and feel the tension in your fist, hand and forearm. (Short pause) Now let your hand relax and go limp, allowing your fingers to become loose.

Notice the contrast between the feeling of tension and now the feeling of relaxation. (Short pause) Let your whole body go and relax even more completely. (Short pause)



Now bend both of your elbows and tense your biceps. Tense them hard until they almost quiver. Hold them tight and study the tension. (Short Pause) Now let your arms straighten out and drop gently to your sides.

Go limp, feeling heavy and relaxed. Notice the tension leave your muscles and experience relaxation that replaces the tension. Let the feeling flow and spread into the rest of your body so that you feel peaceful and calm.

Feel yourself becoming more and more relaxed. (Pause)

From this point onwards, pause where it seems appropriate to allow enough time for the tensing and relaxing to occur.



Focus all your attention on your neck, your shoulders, and your upper back. As you breathe, imagine that you're releasing tension from your neck, shoulders, and upper back. With each breath you take, feel your neck, shoulders and upper back grow heavier and more and more relaxed.

As you release tension in your arms, neck, shoulders, and upper back, feel the wave of relaxation moving downwards through your torso, lower back and stomach. With each breath, you become more and more relaxed.

Now tighten and flex the muscles in your buttocks and thighs. You can flex your thighs by pressing down on your heels with your toes in the air. Hold the tension. Keep your muscles tight and tense, now let go. Relax and notice the difference as you let your hips and thighs relax and allow that feeling to proceed on its own until you feel completely and deeply relaxed.



Now press your toes straight out away from your body as if you were on tiptoes. Feel the muscles in your calves become taut and tense. Hold the tension.

Study the tension and now relax. Feel the difference between the tension



and the delightful, calm, peaceful feeling of being deeply relaxed.

Feel the heaviness of the entire lower body as you relax further still. If you wish, you can become even more deeply relaxed by merely taking a deep breath and slowly exhaling. As you breathe deeply, feel your entire body become heavy, comfortable and relaxed.

Think the following thoughts to yourself: "I feel quiet. I am feeling deeply relaxed. My body feels calm and quiet. My neck, my jaws, my forehead are all calm and smooth. My whole body is heavy, comfortable, relaxed and quiet. My arms and hands are heavy and warm. I am at peace."

At this point, give yourself a few minutes of deep relaxation before moving on towards ending the relaxation session.

Ending the experience

Take a deep breath, wiggle your toes and open your eyes. When you do so, you'll feel refreshed and calm. Take your time sitting up.

Enhancing the experience

You can practice deepening this feeling of relaxation by taking deep breaths and releasing tension with each exhalation and imagining a wave of relaxation moving from the top of your head to the ends of your toes. As you become aware, through this exercise, of different muscle groups and how deliberately you can control the experience of tension and relaxation in your muscles, you increase your capacity to relax. In similar fashion, each time you practice this relaxation exercise you'll find it more familiar and easier to use.





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