

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation is necessary for good health. It gives your body and mind a chance to rest and recover from high-stress situations. Your heart rate slows down, your blood pressure decreases and your muscles relax. Relaxation exercises can help with pain management, decrease fatigue and improve sleep.

You can try many methods to relax. Everyone experiences stress differently, so the method that relaxes you may not relax someone else. Try some of the following methods to find the one that works best for you.

Quick and Easy Relaxation

Relaxation does not always require a practiced technique. Opportunities exist every day to relax. Try a few of these:

- Take a hot bath.
- Curl up and read a good book.
- Get a massage.
- Watch a favorite TV show.
- Go for a walk.
- Play with a pet.
- Listen to your favorite music.
- Do some arts or crafts.
- Lie outside and watch the clouds.
- Chat with a positive friend or family member.



The Six-Second Mini-Relaxation

When a stressful situation occurs, practice this mini-relaxation technique:

1. Become aware of what is annoying you. Is it the ringing telephone or an urge to smoke? Whatever it is, decide that you need to relax, and start the technique.
2. Silently say the phrase “alert mind, calm body” to yourself. Continue to repeat this phrase.
3. Smile inwardly with your eyes and your mouth. An inward smile is more of a feeling than an expression someone may notice. This stops the muscles in your face from tightening up in an angry expression.
4. Inhale slowly while you count to three. Imagine the breath comes from the bottom of your feet.
5. Exhale slowly. Imagine your breath moving back down your legs and out through your feet. Let your jaw and shoulder muscles go limp.

Be sure to practice this technique several times a day and whenever a stressful moment occurs. After several months, it will become an automatic response to stress.

Deep Breathing

One of the easiest relaxation techniques is deep breathing. This takes only a few moments, and you can use it wherever you are.

In order to breathe deeply, breathe from your abdomen (stomach) and not from your chest. To find out if you are breathing from your abdomen or chest, place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly button. Take a normal breath. If the hand on your chest rises the most, you are breathing from your chest. If the hand on your belly button rises the most, you are breathing from your abdomen.

The goal of deep breathing is to breathe from your abdomen to increase the amount of oxygen taken into your body. Breathe in a slow, controlled manner to relax your body. Follow the steps below to practice deep breathing.

1. Get into a comfortable position and close your eyes. Lie down on your back with your knees bent, or sit in a chair. Loosen your belt or any tight clothing.
2. Place your hands over your belly button.
3. Breathe in deeply through your nose, filling your abdomen with air. Your hands on your belly button should rise.
4. Hold your breath for a few seconds, or as long as is comfortable for you.
5. Let all the air out slowly through your nose or mouth. Your hands on your belly button should lower as you breathe out.
6. Continue to breathe in and out with long, slow, deep breaths. Focus on the sound and feel of your breathing as you notice yourself becoming more relaxed.



If you feel lightheaded or dizzy, you may be breathing too quickly or too slowly. Stop practicing the deep breathing exercise for a few moments until the feelings go away.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation teaches the difference between how it feels when your muscles are tense and when they are relaxed. When your muscles are relaxed, your mind and body will be relaxed.

You should tense and relax muscle groups one at a time. When tensing your muscles, do not tense too tightly because this may cause cramping. Following the instructions below, tense and relax your muscles in this order:

1. Hands and arms
2. Head and face
3. Chest, back and shoulders

4. Abdomen and buttocks
5. Legs and feet

To begin, find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. Loosen any tight clothing, and untie your shoes. Sit in a comfortable chair that supports your head, with both feet flat on the floor.

1. Tense all your muscles in the first muscle group – hands and arms. Concentrate on what the tension feels like. Keep your muscles tense for about five seconds.
2. Breathe in deeply from your abdomen.
3. As you breathe out, immediately let go of the tension in the muscles of your hands and arms. Let your muscles go completely limp and relaxed.
4. Repeat the steps above to tense and relax the muscles in your hands and arms at least two times, or until they feel relaxed. Then move on to the next muscle group – head and face.
5. Once you have gone through the steps to tense and relax all of the muscle groups, continue your deep breathing. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation throughout your whole body.

Practice progressive muscle relaxation every day. Be patient with yourself. It may be difficult at first, but with practice, you will quickly relax the muscles in your body.

Meditation

Meditation calms your mind and body by focusing your attention and concentration. It clears your mind of unwanted thoughts and feelings, which leads to a higher level of joy and awareness in life.

There are two main types of meditation:

- **Concentration:** Focus your mind by concentrating on a single object. This calms your mind when it is jumping from one thought to another.
- **Mindfulness:** Take a non-judgmental view of the thoughts that go through your mind, as you allow them to come and go without concentrating on them.



Concentration

To practice concentration meditation, find a quiet place. Sit in a comfortable chair, and close your eyes.

1. Relax your muscles and breathe in and out, slowly and naturally.
2. Mentally focus on an object, such as your breathing, a word, phrase, image or prayer. When starting out, choose a word or phrase, such as “peace” or “one.”
3. Each time you breathe out, say the word or phrase.

Don't be upset if you cannot focus on the object for more than a few seconds. This is normal. As thoughts run through your mind, simply observe them, and then return your focus to the object. With practice, you will gain more control.

Practice meditation once a day for about 10 to 20 minutes. As you learn meditation, try focusing on different objects to find the one that works best for you. Some people find it easier to focus their minds by looking at a picture, rather than saying a word.

Mindfulness

Often in life, we find ourselves thinking about the past or the future. Our mind jumps from one thought to another. Mindfulness is about keeping your attention on the present moment. The purpose of mindfulness is to take you off “autopilot” and become more fully aware of the present.

Being mindful is an attitude toward living. As you learn concentration, calmness and how to focus your mind on the present, you will live life more fully.

By observing simply what is going on around you, with no intention of changing or acting on it, you are training your mind to be calm and aware. Observe and accept life in this way, even with its frustrations and disappointments, to become more calm and clear in your thoughts and actions.

Try the following exercise to learn how to use mindfulness in your everyday life. Start by sitting in a comfortable place.

1. Concentrate on a single thing, such as your breathing. Focus on the feeling of the air as it passes in and out of your nose with each breath. Do not try to control your breathing by speeding it up or slowing it down. Just observe it as it is.
2. Your mind will quickly drift off to thinking about something else. When this happens, observe where your thoughts went. Was it a memory, a worry about the future or a feeling of impatience? Then return your attention to your breathing.
3. Each time a thought or feeling comes to mind, observe what it is, then return to your breathing. Don't judge or act on the thought or feeling. Keep practicing mindfulness, breath by breath.

Start out practicing this exercise for five minutes. As you become better able to focus on the present, practice it for 10 or even 20 minutes.

Once you learn the skill of mindfulness, it is easy to make this part of your daily life. Focus on other things rather than your breathing. When you go for a walk, focus on the way your legs and feet move, and how they feel against the ground. Whenever your mind drifts off, observe the thoughts and then return your focus to walking. Apply mindfulness to many activities in life, such as eating, showering, running errands or playing with your children. Over time, mindfulness will become a way of life, as you learn to become more fully aware of the present.

Imagery

Pleasant Imagery

Pleasant imagery uses your mind to recreate and enjoy a situation or environment that you find relaxing. Imagine yourself in a pleasant or calming setting, such as a favorite vacation spot, or

with someone whose company you enjoy. It is like focused daydreaming, and it is limited only by your creativity.

Use all of your senses. For example, imagine a day at the beach – the sound of the waves, the smell of the ocean, the taste of a cool glass of lemonade, the warmth of the sun and so on.

You can also use imagery along with deep breathing. As you practice deep breathing, use calming mental images to relax further. Imagine that each breath has a calming effect as it goes throughout your body. For example, on a hot, sunny day, imagine cool, refreshing breaths.

Behavioral Rehearsal Imagery

Behavioral rehearsal imagery is when you rehearse for a situation. For example, if you have questions about your treatment and are nervous about asking your doctor, you might write down the questions you have and practice asking them in your mind or with a friend. When you rehearse a situation, you mentally prepare what you will do and say, feeling more in control and more confident. It also reduces stress so that you stay relaxed in stressful situations.

Resources

Integrative Medicine Center

The Integrative Medicine Center aims to enhance cancer care and quality of life. Programs are open to anyone touched by cancer, their family members and caregivers. You are welcome even if you are not an MD Anderson patient. Approaches focus on the mind, body and spirit. Get health advice about how to pursue an integrative approach to cancer care. Join in free group programs, such as meditation, yoga, music therapy and more. Massage and acupuncture also are available for a nominal fee.

Relaxation videos are available for viewing at www.mdanderson.org/cimer. Click on “Multimedia” in the left navigation bar, then “Mind-Spirit” in the right navigation bar. Videos cover topics such as relaxation massage, meditation and yoga.

For more information about the Integrative Medicine Center, call 713-794-4700.

The Learning Center

The Learning Center is a free consumer health library with the latest information on cancer care, support, prevention and general health and wellness issues, including information on relaxation techniques. Knowledgeable staff and volunteers help visitors locate the information they need.

- Law Learning Center - Main Building, Floor 4, near Elevator A – 713-745-8063.
- Levit Learning Center - Mays Clinic, Floor 2, near The Tree Sculpture – 713-563-8010