



Learning to relax

Basics

We judge how much stress we're under by the amount of physical and emotional tension we feel. Too much tension can be unhealthy and uncomfortable. This is why relaxation is so important. Relaxation helps us reduce some of the tension we get from stress. This helps us function better.

Our bodies cope with stress by "powering down" when we sleep. During sleep, our bodies become relaxed. Our heart rate, pulse and breathing slow down. Our blood pressure and body temperature decrease. This gives our bodies and minds a chance to renew. It allows us to face the next day with physical and mental vigor.

Relaxation isn't sleep. But it has the same benefits:

- Decreased muscle tension.
- Lower blood pressure.
- Increased energy.
- Improved immune system.
- Less irritability.
- Better focus.

Relaxation does the opposite of what stress does. It gives the body a break. It soothes physical problems caused by stress. Relaxation can help manage pain. It reduces muscle tension from injury or illness. And it can distract you from worries. Even a brief relaxation exercise provides an energy boost. It gives you a time-out from thinking about a problem. When you return to the problem, you may focus better. You may think of new solutions.

Tips

Tip 1

Learning to relax is like learning to play golf: It takes practice, especially if you're used to being under stress. You can benefit from relaxation with only 15 to 20 minutes of practice per day.

Tip 2

Relaxation may sound like a term for goofing off. But it can benefit your health. Research shows relaxation helps symptoms of medical and behavioral disorders. These include:

- High blood pressure.

- Chronic pain.
- Acute pain.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Asthma and allergies.
- Addiction.
- Diabetes.
- Insomnia.
- Muscle spasms.
- Headaches.
- Diabetes.
- Insomnia.
- Muscle spasms.
- Headaches.
- Anxiety and fear.
- Premenstrual syndrome (PMS).
- Irritable bowel syndrome.

Specifics

There are many methods to help you relax. Your choice of a method depends on your personality and needs. You can see what works best for you. Use a book or a tape. Or take a class. Common ways to relax are:

- **Deep breathing.** This is a simple exercise. It can be used almost anywhere. No one will know but you. Take slow, deep breaths. Breathe from the diaphragm. Exhale slowly. Let the whole body relax more with each breath. Most relaxation methods include deep breathing.
- **Progressive (deep) muscle relaxation.** This exercise involves tensing groups of muscles. Then you release them. It helps people who feel tense everywhere. Or people who aren't sure about what is tense and what is relaxed.
- **Passive muscle relaxation.** This is like progressive muscle relaxation. But the muscles aren't tensed first. You move through each part of your body. You focus on feelings of comfort and relaxation in all muscles of an area. You move from head to toe. Or vice versa. And you allow feelings of relaxation to spread.
- **Meditation.** This method has been practiced in many cultures for centuries. Rest in a comfortable position. Try to be in a place with few distractions. Focus your attention on only one thing. This can be:
 - A mantra - a repeated word or phrase.
 - A sound - the wind or running water.
 - Something you see - a candle flame, a spot on the wall, a photograph.

The goal is to refocus your attention when you get distracted.

- **Imagery or visualizing.** Use your imagination. Create a visual image of a relaxing or soothing place or thing. Imagine every element to make it real. This includes:
 - Sight.
 - Sound.
 - Taste.
 - Action.
 - Texture.

- **Autogenics.** This method uses verbal commands to lead your body to a relaxed state. Words or phrases are repeated. They focus on relaxing physical responses. Phrases may refer to feelings of heaviness or warmth. They will focus on regular heart rhythm or muscle relaxation. The phrases may focus on positive concepts or images.

- **Self-hypnosis.** The body is deeply relaxed during self-hypnosis. The mind is narrowly focused. You experience thoughts, suggestions and images as real. Hypnosis can change:
 - Feelings of pain.
 - Blood flow.
 - Brain wave activity.
 - Organ functions.
 - Thoughts.
 - Emotions.
 - Behaviors.

- **Biofeedback.** This method uses instruments to monitor physical responses. It does not make you relax. It tells you what your body is doing. Then you can use relaxation strategies. You can change your responses. Your thoughts and actions can change physical processes. These include:
 - Heart rate.
 - Muscle tension.
 - Brain wave activity.
 - Blood pressure.
 - Breathing.
 - Perspiration.

FAQs

When should I relax?

Take a relaxation break when you have stress-related symptoms:

- Fatigue.
- Decreased concentration.
- Stiff or aching muscles.
- Increased irritability.

- Impatience.
- Headache.
- "Mental overload."

How can I relax when I have so much on my mind? I can't concentrate.

It's normal to have a hard time focusing on relaxation. Relaxation is a skill. It takes practice. Practice at a time when you are calm. You should be free of major distractions. When distractions creep in, tell yourself to put them aside. Wait until your relaxation time is over. You will be better able to handle them.

I tried relaxation once or twice and it made me feel anxious. Why?

That can happen sometimes. Try using a structured approach like progressive muscle relaxation. You also can consult a relaxation therapist for advice or training.

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