

# Relaxation techniques: Learn ways to calm your stress

Relaxation techniques are a great way to help your quest for stress management. Relaxation isn't just about peace of mind or enjoying a hobby. Relaxation is a process that decreases the wear and tear of life's challenges on your mind and body.

Whether you have a lot of stress in your life or you've got it under control, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques isn't hard. Explore these simple relaxation techniques to get you started on de-stressing your life and improving your health.

## The benefits of relaxation techniques

With so many things to do, relaxation techniques may take a back seat in your life. But that means you may miss out on the health benefits of relaxation.

Practicing relaxation techniques can improve how you physically respond to stress by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Lowering blood pressure
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Reducing the need for oxygen
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension

You may also gain these overall health and lifestyle benefits from relaxation techniques:

- Fewer physical symptoms, such as headaches and back pain
- Fewer emotional responses, such as anger and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

## Types of relaxation techniques

Although health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach relaxation techniques, you can also learn some on your own. Relaxation techniques usually involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation, and you become more aware of physical sensations. You may choose to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.
- **Visualization.** In this technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. Try to use as many senses as you can, including smells, sights, sounds and textures. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about the warmth of the sun, the sound of crashing waves, the feel of the grains of sand and the smell of salt water. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other relaxation techniques include those you may be more familiar with, such as:

- Yoga
- Tai chi
- Music
- Exercise
- Meditation
- Hypnosis
- Massage

## **Relaxation techniques take practice**

As you learn relaxation techniques, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment your muscles start to tense. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself. Stay motivated to reduce the negative impact of stress on your body and to experience a greater sense of calm in your life.

And bear in mind that some people, especially those with significant psychological problems and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional.

# Meditation: Take a stress-reduction break wherever you are

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years. Originally, it was meant to help people deepen their understanding of the sacred and mystical forces of life. These days, many people turn to meditation for relaxation and stress reduction.

Meditation produces a deep state of relaxation and a tranquil mind. Meditation can give you a sense of calm, peace and emotional stability. And these effects don't end when your meditation session ends. Meditation can have lasting effects on your emotional and physical well-being.

Don't be daunted by meditation. Anyone can practice meditation. It's simple and inexpensive and doesn't require any special equipment. You can spend a few minutes in meditation almost anywhere — whether you're on the job, out for a walk, riding the bus, doing the laundry or waiting at the doctor's office.

## Meditation and medical illnesses

Many healthy people use meditation as a way to relax the body and reduce stress. But meditation may also be useful if you have a medical disease or condition, especially one that may be worsened by stress. Scientific research about the benefits of meditation is continuing, and the results are mixed. Keeping that in mind, some research shows that meditation may help such conditions as:

- Allergies
- Anxiety
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease

Be sure to talk to your health care professional about the pros and cons of using meditation if you have any of these or other medical conditions. Meditation isn't a replacement for traditional medical treatment. But it may be useful in addition to your other treatment.

## Fitting meditation into your lifestyle

When you meditate, you clear away the information overload that builds up every day. When your mind is clear of distracting thoughts, you gain new perspectives and new ways of handling stress and other problems. You become more self-aware. You focus on the here and now — not on your ever-growing to-do list.

While there are many different ways to meditate, the goal is the same — inner peace. You may have heard about transcendental meditation, Zen meditation, movement meditation and other forms of meditation. But don't let the thought of meditating the "right" way add to your stress.

Sure, you can certainly attend special meditation centers or group classes led by trained instructors to practice such forms of meditation as:

- Yoga
- Tai chi
- Guided meditation
- Qi gong

But you can also practice meditation easily on your own. You can find everyday opportunities to meditate wherever you happen to be. You can also make meditation as formal or informal as you like — whatever suits your lifestyle and situation. Some people build meditation into their daily routine. For example, they may start and end each day with an hour of meditation. If you're short on time, all you really need is a few minutes.

## Everyday ways to practice meditation

Here are some ways you can practice meditation on your own, whenever you choose. Take a few minutes or as much time as you like.

- **Breathe deeply.** This technique is good for beginners because breathing is a natural function. Focus all attention on your breathing. Concentrate on feeling and listening as you inhale and exhale through your nostrils. Breathe deeply and slowly. When you feel your attention wander, gently return your focus to your breathing.
- **Scan your body.** When using this technique, focus attention on different parts of your body. Become aware of your body's various sensations, whether that's pain, tension, warmth or relaxation. Combine body scanning with breathing exercises and imagine breathing heat or relaxation into and out of different parts of your body.
- **Repeat a sacred name or phrase.** A mantra is the name of a sacred deity or a sacred phrase that you repeat silently or aloud. You can create your own mantra. Mantras are the building blocks of transcendental meditation. Examples of religious mantras include a Jesus prayer in the Christian tradition, the holy name of God in Judaism, or the Om mantra of Hinduism, Buddhism and other Eastern religions.
- **Walking meditation.** Combining a walk with meditation is an efficient and healthy way to relax. You can use this technique anywhere you're walking — in a tranquil forest, on a city sidewalk or at the mall. When you use this method, slow down the pace of walking so that you can focus on each movement of your legs or feet. Don't focus on a particular destination. Concentrate on your legs and feet, repeating action words in your mind such as lifting, moving and placing as you lift each foot, move your leg forward and place your foot on the ground.
- **Engage in prayer.** Prayer is the best known and most widely practiced example of meditation. Spoken and written prayers are found in most faith traditions. You can pray using your own words or read prayers written by others. Check the self-help or 12-step-recovery section of your local bookstore for examples. Talk with your rabbi, priest, pastor or other spiritual leader about resources.
- **Read or listen and take time to reflect.** Many people report that they benefit from reading poems or sacred texts silently or aloud, and taking a few moments to quietly reflect on the meaning that the words bring to mind. You can listen to sacred music,

spoken words or any music you find relaxing or inspiring. You may want to write your reflections in a journal or discuss them with a friend or spiritual leader.

- **Focus your love and gratitude.** In this type of meditation, you focus your attention on a sacred object or being, weaving feelings of love and gratitude into your thoughts. You can also close your eyes and use your imagination or gaze at representations of the object.

## Practice meditation skills

Be kind to yourself as you get started with meditation. It's common for the mind to wander during meditation, no matter how long you've been practicing meditation, and that's OK, too. If you're meditating to calm your mind and your attention wanders, slowly return to the object, sensation or movement you're focusing on. You can use an image to bring yourself back to your focus if you'd like. Try this: Picture balloons floating away with your thoughts, or imagine your thoughts as pigeons and mentally clap your hands to get them to fly away.

Experiment, and you'll likely find out what types of meditation work best for you. Adapt meditation to your needs at the moment. Remember, there's no right way or wrong way to meditate. What matters is that meditation helps you with stress reduction and feeling better overall.

Get comfortable in your chair. Loosen any tight, uncomfortable clothing. Let your arms rest loosely at your side. Allow yourself a few moments to relax.

If your thoughts wander, just let them while gently moving your attention back to the relaxation. If you become anxious or uncomfortable, stop the relaxation by clicking on the pause button.

To begin, focus your eyes on the candle flame. Notice its simplicity and its beauty.

Take time to notice your breathing, gradually slowing down the rate of inhaling and exhaling as you become more comfortable.

Now relax and enjoy the feeling.

Close your mouth and relax your shoulders, releasing any tension that's built up.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Let the air you breathe in push your stomach out.

Hold your breath in as you slowly count to four.

Breathe out slowly through your mouth as you continue counting up to six.

Breathe in (three, four, five, six).

Hold (two, three, four).

Breathe out (three, four, five, six).

Breathe in (three, four, five, six).

Hold (two, three and four).

Breathe out (three, four, five, six).

Breathe in (three, four, five, six).

Hold (two, three, four).

Breathe out (three, four, five, six).

Breathe in (three, four, five, six).

Hold (two, three, four).

Breathe out (three, four, five, six).

Breathe in (three, four, five, six).

Hold (two, three, four).

Breathe out (three, four, five, six).

Continue breathing in (four, five, six).

Hold (two, three, four).

And out (three, four, five, six).

Remember, if stray thoughts enter your mind, gently return your attention to the relaxation.

Now, as you breathe out, silently and calmly repeat to yourself:

My breathing is smooth and rhythmic.

My breathing is smooth and rhythmic.

My breathing is easy and calm.

My breathing is easy and calm.

It feels very pleasant.

If you'd like, you may close your eyes now and focus on the music, or continue to look at the flame.

Continue to repeat to yourself:

My breathing is smooth and rhythmic.

My breathing is smooth and rhythmic.

I am peaceful and calm.

I am peaceful and calm.

Continue to take deep, rhythmic breaths. Let the tension fade away each time you breathe out. Let the music soothe you.

If you've closed your eyes, gently open them and gaze at the candle flame.

Return to your day peaceful, more focused and relaxed.