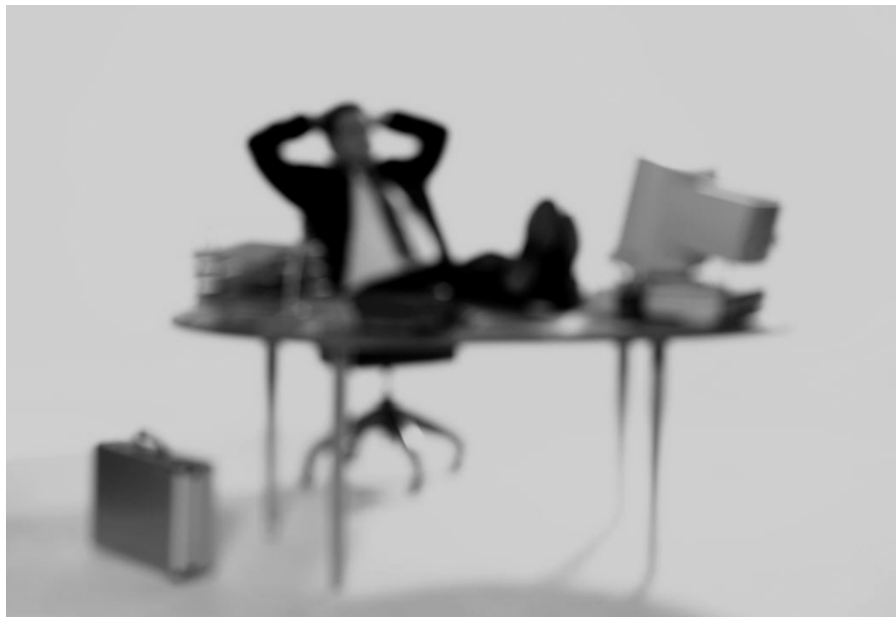


Tension Reduction Techniques



Objectives

To increase resilience to stress through practicing effective relaxation techniques including:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Stretching
- Visualization
- Meditation

No *one* exercise can make you relax. Only *you* can give your body permission to relax. Relaxation takes practice: 3 – 4 weeks to learn the skill.



Deep Breathing

Sit in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you wish.

Place the palm of either hand flat against your abdomen (the area right below your rib cage).

Take a deep breath, pushing out against your palm with your abdominal muscles. Feel your hand move out as you breathe in.

Now breathe out – still keeping your palm flat against your body. Feel your hand move in.

Now try this exercise inhaling slowly through your nose.

Inhale – hold your breath for a count of one – and then exhale slowly through your mouth. While exhaling, say softly to yourself – “relax”. Let all thoughts other than your breathing leave your mind.

Remember, concentrate only on your breathing.

- Inhale
- Hold
- Exhale
- (Repeat six times)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Your body responds to stress with muscle tension
- Deep muscle relaxation reduces tension
- Let your eyes relax
- Progressive tense/relax
- Focus on one muscle group at a time



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Allow yourself 20 minutes to do this exercise. If possible, choose a quiet place where you can lie down undisturbed. Eventually you will be able to do all or part of this exercise sitting up at your workplace.

1. Relax your entire body as much as possible, allowing it to feel heavy. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Imagine the tension flowing out with each breath.
2. Now contract the muscles of your feet as you inhale. Hold the contraction briefly, then relax as you breathe out, still imagining the tension flowing out with the breath. Breathing out and relaxing should take more time than breathing in and contracting. Notice the feel of the muscles as they are contracted or relaxed.
3. Move up your body, contracting in turn the muscles of the lower legs, upper legs, buttocks and abdomen, and so on up through the body, including your arms and hands. End with your face, tensing and relaxing the muscles of your mouth, jaw, eyes and scalp. If a muscle seems particularly tense already, repeat the contraction with that muscle group.
4. Now lie still for five minutes, just experiencing your relaxed muscles. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply, feeling tension flow out and relaxation get deeper and deeper with each breath.
5. When you are ready to get up, count backward from four to one. Though you may be groggy at first, in a few minutes you will feel awake and refreshed.

This exercise not only relaxes you, but it also trains your body to recognize and reduce muscle tension. Do it daily if possible, along with other stress-reducing techniques, or take time for a session whenever you begin to feel stressed out. You can do a mini-relaxation on the muscles you use in your work, such as the neck and shoulders if you sit at a desk.

Relax Your “Stress Triangle”

The head, neck and shoulder areas (which form the “stress triangle”) are the places where we hold much of our tension. Learning how to release the tension in these muscles can help us relax and “de-stress.”

Find Your “Stress Triangle.” Place your left hand on your right shoulder. Move your fingers halfway in toward your neck. You’re at one point of the triangle. The second point is the same place off your left shoulder. The third point is on your forehead, between your eyes. This “stress triangle” is where we hold much of our tension. These simple stretches and rolls can help relieve tightness in your “stress triangle.”

Neck roll. Stretch your right ear to your right shoulder, keeping your left shoulder pulled down. Roll your head down so your chin is on your chest. Continue on to your left side. Do rolls from side to side. Begin with eight, build up to 16.

Shoulder shrug. Draw a big circle with your shoulders, one at a time. Start with four, build up to eight times, going forward, then back.

Pick fruit. With one hand, reach up as if you were picking an apple from a tree slightly ahead and far above you. Go from one arm to the other, building up to eight times on each side.

Massage yourself. Use your right hand to work on your left shoulder and left hand on your right shoulder. Work your fingers gently but firmly, beginning with your shoulder blade, moving up toward the neck and including the scalp.

Standing body roll. Let your head roll forward until your chin is on your chest. Keep rolling down as your knees begin to bend. When your hands are hanging near your knees, rest there a moment and slowly roll back up. Work up to 10 times.

Stretching

Stretching is something you can do no matter where you are - and the exercises here can even be done right at your desk. But before you begin, here are a few tips:

Breathe deeply and slowly in rhythm with your body's movements. Don't hold your breath while doing an exercise.

Only do stretches that feel right. If a stretch hurts, stop. You can always try again when your body develops greater flexibility.

If you want to extend a stretch, try to relax and breathe into it. Never force a stretch.

Get into a comfortable rhythm or pace. If you don't have the time, it's better to do two stretches completely than several quickly.

Now you are ready to give stretching a chance to work for you. Whether you can do two minutes or twenty minutes at a time, you'll start to see results from these relaxing stretches immediately.



Arm Stretches

Before you do this or any stretching exercise in a chair, sit with your back straight, your chest expanded, and your shoulders relaxed.

Hold your arms out to your sides, palms down.

Stretch your fingertips toward the opposite walls.

Take a deep breath, exhale, and feel yourself relax.

Keeping your arms outstretched, bring your hands up over your head and stretch your forearms. Hold this position for as long as it's comfortable. Now, bring your arms down and out to your sides slowly and breathe deeply. Hold this position as long as you are able to comfortably.

Next, tilt your body so that your right hand reaches toward the ceiling and your left hand touches the floor. Hold the stretch for as long as it's comfortable. Now come up slowly.

Continue using opposite hands. Tilt your body so that your left hand reaches toward the ceiling and your right hand touches the floor.

Hold the stretch for as long as you are able to comfortably. Again, come up slowly.

Chair Chest Stretch

Move yourself up to the edge of your chair and hold onto the seat on both sides.

Slowly stretch your body up so that your chest lifts, your shoulders drop, and your head tilts back. Make sure the stretch is comfortable.

Breathe deeply and let yourself relax.

Hold the stretch as long as it feels comfortable.



Bend and Breathe

Stand tall and take a deep breath.

Bring your arms straight up over your head and stretch toward the ceiling.

Now, exhale, bend your knees and let your arms drop toward the floor. Bend only as much as is comfortable.

Let your body relax - let your head droop; feel any heaviness move down through your hands and out of your body.

Take deep breaths and continue to relax.

When you are ready to stand, do so slowly and carefully by walking your hands up your legs.

Visualization

Here is an easy stress management technique that you can use anywhere. Visualization is a kind of “guided daydreaming” to help you relax when stress is getting the better of you. It takes only two or three minutes, though you may want to get ready for it by doing another relaxation exercise, such as deep breathing, before you begin.

Give Yourself Permission.

Sometimes visualization is difficult at first. Perhaps there’s an inner voice telling you that daydreaming is unproductive and a waste of time. But some mental time out is important for your health. Many of our most creative ideas arise during daydreaming. Give yourself permission to visualize, and with practice it will become natural and relaxing.

Create Your Daydream. Here’s what you do: picture a scene in which you are perfectly relaxed. Perhaps you are lying on the grass on a warm spring day. Continue to visualize this scene, noticing the warmth of the sun, the breeze in the treetops, the sound of a bird singing. Keep doing this, focusing on the pleasant details of the scene until you feel as relaxed as though you were actually lying in the grass. Naturally, if you don’t enjoy lying in the grass you’ll visualize a different scene. Here are some sample visualizations:

It is a warm day. You are lying on your back on your raft, drifting in the shade of the trees along the shore. You trail your fingers in the cool water, relaxing completely, just rocking gently on the water and watching tiny fluffy clouds drift across the sky. It is very comfortable. You lie there as long as you want, just feeling relaxed. . .

You're sitting by a crackling fire, wrapped in soft blankets. Outside a cold rain falls, but here there is only the sound of the fire and the flicker of the flames. You feel the warmth on your face, how it relaxes and soothes all your muscles. A log falls, sending up a shower of sparks. You sigh and stretch, feeling so comfortable, calm and relaxed. . .

Now you try one...

Meditation

Meditation is known to be an effective way of coping with daily stress. There are many ways to meditate. Try this method, which focuses on counting the breath.

Choose a quiet room that is not too brightly lit. The best times to do meditation are before breakfast and before dinner, but any time will do. Allow yourself five minutes at first and gradually work up to 20 minutes or more at a sitting.

Sit upright in a straight chair, with your spine erect, your ears above your shoulders and your chin tucked in—as if there were a string attached to the top of your head pulling you upright. Feet should be flat on the floor, the hands resting in your lap.

Rock back and forth until you feel your posture is centered and balanced. Let your eyes droop nearly closed and directed toward a spot on the floor a few feet in front of you. Keep your body perfectly still unless you need to shift because of pain or discomfort.

Start with some deep breathing: inhale normally and exhale deeply, letting all the breath flow out. Pause, then inhale, letting the breath flow in naturally. Use the muscles of your abdomen rather than your chest to breathe.

Now allow your breathing to become natural and somewhat slow, as though you were settling down to sleep. As you exhale, count “one.” Continue counting, each time you exhale, up to 10.

If thoughts enter your mind and you forget to count, simply notice and dismiss the thoughts, then begin again at “one.” Do the same with sounds and bodily sensations: simply notice and dismiss them.

Talk to a *Faculty & Staff Assistance Program counselor* or visit the website for help with personal or professional concerns.

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