



Achieving Relaxation

The capacity to relax is at the very foundation of any program to overcome stress, anxiety, phobias or panic attacks. Relaxation is more than unwinding in front of the TV or in the bathtub at the end of the day.

The type of relaxation that really makes a difference in dealing with anxiety is the regular daily practice of some form of deep relaxation. Regular practice of deep relaxation for 20 to 30 minutes on a daily basis can produce, over time, an overall feeling of being relaxed almost every day of your life.

Deep Relaxation

Deep Relaxation Involves a Series of Physiological Changes

- Decrease in heart rate
- Decrease in blood pressure
- Decrease in metabolic rate and oxygen consumption
- Increase in skin resistance
- Decrease in respiration rate
- Decrease in skeletal muscle tension
- Decrease in analytical thinking
- Increase in alpha wave activity in the brain

Other Benefits of Deep Relaxation

- Reduces frequency and intensity of panic attacks
- Prevents stress from becoming cumulative
- Reduces insomnia and fatigue
- Increases energy level and productivity
- Improves concentration and memory
- Increases self-awareness and self-confidence

Common Methods of Achieving Deep Relaxation

- Abdominal breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Visualizing a peaceful scene

Your breathing directly reflects the level of tension you carry in your body. When you are under stress, your breathing usually becomes shallow and rapid, and occurs high in the chest. When relaxed, you breathe more fully, more deeply and from your abdomen.

- Meditation
- Guided imagery
- Autogenic training
- Biofeedback
- Sensory deprivation

Abdominal Breathing

Problematic: Shallow, chest-level breathing

Research has shown that people who are fearful and shy tend to breathe in a shallow fashion from their chest, while people who are extroverted and relaxed breathe more slowly, deeply, and from their abdomens.

Problematic: Hyperventilation syndrome

If you breathe shallow, you may tend to over-breathe and exhale excess carbon dioxide in relation to the amount of oxygen in your bloodstream (too much oxygen, not enough carbon dioxide). The result is a cluster of symptoms: rapid heartbeat, dizziness, and a tingling sensation. All of these symptoms can be mistakenly interpreted as developing a panic attack. As soon as you start believing you are having a panic attack, then it can actually set off a panic attack. You can reverse the symptoms of hyperventilation by breathing into a bag or doing abdominal breathing. Both will help to restore the proper balance of the ratio of oxygen to carbon dioxide.

Abdominal Breathing Exercise

1. Note the level of tension you are feeling. Rate it from 0 (none) to 10 (severe).
2. Place one hand on your abdomen right beneath your rib cage.
3. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into the bottom of your lungs. If you are breathing from your abdomen, your hand should actually rise.
4. As you inhale slowly, count 1-2-3-4. Pause for a moment. Then as you exhale slowly, count 1-2-3-4. You can exhale from your nose or your mouth. Be sure to exhale fully. As you exhale, allow your whole body to just let go.
5. Do 10 slow abdominal breaths. Try to keep your breathing smooth and regular.

6. Extend the exercise if you wish by doing two or three sets of abdominal breaths. Five full minutes of abdominal breathing will have a pronounced effect on reducing anxiety or early symptoms of panic.

Calming Breathing Exercise

1. Breathing from your abdomen, inhale slowly through your nose. Slowly count to five as you inhale.
2. Pause and hold your breath for a count of five.
3. Exhale slowly through your nose or mouth to a count of five. Be sure to exhale fully.
4. When you have exhaled fully, take two breaths in your normal rhythm, and then repeat steps 1 through 3.
5. Keep your breathing smooth and regular. For a variation, try saying to yourself, “relax,” “calm,” or “let go,” each time you exhale.
6. Keep up the exercise for five minutes

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The idea behind progressive muscle relaxation is to tense a muscle group for 10 seconds, and then let go of it suddenly. You then give yourself 15 to 20 seconds to relax, noticing how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to what it felt like when tensed. This process is repeated with all 16 muscle groups.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Exercise

Practice this exercise at least 20 minutes per day. Two 20-minute periods are preferable. Find a quiet location where you will not be distracted. Turn off the ringer on the phone and put soft, soothing music on to drown out background noise. Try to practice at regular times during the day. When you first get up in the morning, when you are ready for sleep or before mealtimes. Be sure to practice on an empty stomach.

1. Assume a comfortable position. Your entire body, including your head, should be supported.
2. Loosen any tight clothing. Take off your shoes, watch, glasses, jewelry, etc.
3. Make a decision not to worry about anything. Give yourself permission to put aside your concerns for the day.

Tensing and releasing the 16 muscle groups throughout the body produces a deep state of relaxation. This technique is especially helpful for people who tend to hold their tension in their muscles. There are no contraindications for progressive muscle relaxation unless the muscle groups to be tensed and relaxed have been injured.

Notes:

4. Assume a passive, detached attitude. Do not try to relax. Do not try to control your body. Do not judge your performance. The point is to let go.
5. When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously, without straining for 7 to 10 seconds.
6. When you release the muscle group, do so abruptly, and then relax. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15 to 20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
7. Allow all other muscle groups in your body to remain relaxed as much as possible.
8. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time.
9. Clench your fists. Hold for 7 to 10 seconds and then release for 15 to 20 seconds. Use this same interval of times for all other muscle groups.
10. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and “making a muscle” with both arms. Hold. Then relax.
11. Tighten your triceps by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold. Then relax.
12. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold. Then relax.
13. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold. Then relax.
14. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Or, tighten your jaws by clenching your teeth together. Hold. Then relax.
15. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by gently pulling your head way back. Hold. Then relax. Since this muscle is typically tight, repeat this twice.
16. Tighten the muscle in your neck by gently pulling your chin to your chest. Hold. Then relax. Since this muscle is typically tight, repeat this twice.
17. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold. Then relax. Repeat this twice.
18. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold and then release your breath.
19. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold and then release.

20. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. Hold. Then relax.
21. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold. Then relax.
22. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes downward. Hold. Then relax.
23. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two cycles for that muscle group.
24. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and working down through your toes.

The Peaceful Scene

Peaceful Scene Exercise

Example: The Beach

You're walking down a long path to a very beautiful expansive beach. It looks almost deserted and stretches off into the distance as far as you can see. The sand is very fine and light, almost white in appearance. You step onto the sand in your bare feet and rub it between your toes. It feels good to walk slowly along this beautiful beach. The roaring sound of the waves ebbs and flows. They are slowly crashing in, breaking over each other. Then slowly flowing back out again. The ocean itself is a deep shade of blue. You look out over the surface of the ocean all the way to the horizon, and then follow the horizon as far as you can see; noticing how it bends slightly downward as it follows the curvature of the earth. As you scan the ocean you can see, many miles offshore, a tiny sailboat skimming along the surface of the water. All these sights help you to just let go and relax even more. As you continue walking down the beach, you become aware of the fresh, salty smell of the sea air. You take in a deep breath. You breathe out slowly. You feel very refreshed and relaxed. Overhead you notice two seagulls flying out to sea. Looking graceful as they soar into the wind. You find yourself settling into a state of relaxation as you continue walking down the beach. You feel the sea breeze blowing gently against your cheek and the warmth of the sun just relaxes you even more. It is such a lovely day. In a moment, up ahead, you see a comfortable looking beach chair. Slowly, you begin to approach the beach chair. When you finally reach it, you sit back and settle in. Lying back in this comfortable chair, you let go and relax even more. In a little while, you close your eyes and just listen to the sound of the surf – the unending cycle of waves ebbing and flowing. And the rhythmic sound of the surf carries you even deeper, deeper still, into a state of quietness and peace.

After completing the progressive muscle relaxation, it is helpful to visualize yourself in the midst of a peaceful scene. This scene can be a quiet beach, a stream in the mountains, a calm lake, or a cozy fireside. The important thing is to visualize the scene in sufficient detail so that it completely absorbs your attention.

Once you have developed your peaceful scene, practice returning to it every time you practice progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing or any other relaxation technique. After a while, you will be able to return to it on the spur of the moment.

You may wish to record your peaceful scene on a cassette tape so that you can go through it without effort.

- Design your own peaceful scene.
- Be sure to describe it in vivid detail. Appeal to all your senses.
- What does the scene look like?
- What colors are prominent?
- What sounds are present?
- What time of day is it?
- What is the temperature?
- What are you touching or in physical contact with in the scene?
- What does the air smell like?
- Are you alone or with somebody else?

Meditation

We rarely spend any time experiencing ourselves “just being” in the present moment. In Western society, the idea of doing nothing or “just being” is difficult to comprehend. Meditation is a process of bringing you to “just being.” It is a process that gets you to completely stop, let go of thoughts about the immediate past or future and simply focus on being in the here and now. Meditation has been around for over 5,000 years. Traditionally, the benefits have been spiritual in nature, but more recently it has become popular apart from a religious framework for personal growth or relaxation.

Most people find it takes persistent practice and disciplined effort over a period of several months to become proficient at meditation. Even though meditation is demanding to learn, it is for many people the most rewarding.

Meditation Exercise

1. Find a quiet environment. Play soft, soothing music if you need to eliminate some background noise.
2. Reduce muscle tension. If you are feeling tense, spend some time doing muscle relaxation exercises first. Focus on the upper body, your head, your neck, and your shoulders. Do not spend more than 10 minutes relaxing your muscles.

Try the following sequence of head and neck exercises to get relaxed.

- Slowly touch your chin to your chest 3 times.
 - Bend your head back to gently stretch the back of your neck 3 times.
 - Bend your head over to your right shoulder 3 times.
 - Slowly rotate your head clockwise for 3 complete rotations.
 - Slowly rotate your head counterclockwise for 3 complete rotations.
3. Sit properly.
- Eastern style: sit cross-legged on the floor with a cushion or pillow supporting your buttocks. Rest your hands on your thighs. Lean slightly forward so that your thighs support some of your weight.
 - Western style: sit in a comfortable, straight-backed chair, with your feet on the floor, legs uncrossed and hands on your thighs.
4. In either position, keep your back and neck straight without straining to do so. Do not assume a tight, inflexible posture. If you need to scratch or move, do so. In general, do not lie down or support your head, this will tend to promote sleep.
5. Set aside 20 to 30 minutes for meditation. As a beginner, you might want to start with 5 to 10 minutes.
6. Make it a regular practice to meditate every day. Even if you meditate for only 5 minutes, it is important to do it every day.
7. Meditating is easier if you do not do it on a full stomach or when you are tired.
8. Select a focus for your attention. This can be your own breathing, a mantra or a physical object.
9. Assume a non-judgmental, passive attitude. Do not force or strain yourself to concentrate on your focus of attention. When thoughts or daydreams come into your mind, attempt neither to hold on to them nor reject them too vigorously. Just allow them to come and go. Every time your attention wanders from your object of focus, gently bring it back again. Distractions are normal. Do not judge yourself when they come up. Do not dwell on the outcome of your meditation. The more you let go and refrain from trying to do anything, other than gently guiding your attention back to your object of focus, the deeper your experience of the meditation will be.

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Meditation Using a Mantra

1. Select a word to focus on.
2. A neutral word such as “one.”
3. A Sanskrit mantra such as “Om Shanti,” “Sri Ram,” “So-Hum.”
4. A word or phrase that communicates relaxation and peace such as “I am at peace,” “Let go, let go.”
5. Repeat this word or phrase, ideally on exhalation.
6. As any thoughts come to mind, just let them pass over and through you and gently bring your attention back to the mantra.

Meditation Using Counting Breaths

1. Focus on the inflow and outflow of your breath. Each time you breathe out, count the breath. You can count up to 10 and start over again. Or, you can keep counting one with each exhalation.
2. Each time your focus wanders, bring it back to your breathing and counting.
3. If you lose track of the count, start over at one.
4. After practicing breath-counting meditation, you may want to let go of the counting and just focus on the inflow and outflow of your breathing.

Common Excuses to a Daily Program of Deep Relaxation

Practicing deep relaxation is more than learning a technique. It involves making a basic shift in your attitude and lifestyle. It requires a willingness to give priority to your health and internal peace of mind over other pressing claims of productivity, accomplishment, money or status.

“I do not have time to relax.”

This means you have not made relaxation a priority over other activities.

“I do not have any place to relax.”

Try creating one. You will be surprised. You may have to adjust when you practice so that the house is as quiet and free from distraction as possible.

“Relaxation exercises seem too slow and boring.”

Slow down. That is the whole point.

“I feel more anxious when I relax.”

In some individuals, deep relaxation may bring up suppressed feelings, which are often accompanied by sensations of anxiety. With time and practice, this particular problem should diminish.

“I just do not have the discipline.”

This means you have not persisted with practicing long enough to make it a habit. You may have had similar statements to yourself in the past when you attempted to acquire a new behavior – for example, brushing your teeth.

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Make “Down Time” a Priority

Down time is time out from work or other responsibilities to give yourself an opportunity to rest and replenish your energy. Without periods of down time, your stress will accumulate and build up without remission.

There are Three Kinds of Down Time

1. Rest time – deep relaxation, lying on the couch, listening to music, soaking in the tub, taking a catnap, etc.
2. Recreation time – gardening, reading, going to a movie, walking, baking, fishing, etc.
3. Relationship time – spending time with spouse, children, family, friends, pets, etc.

Making Time for Relaxation Requires Effective Time Management***Prioritization***

- This involves learning to discriminate between tasks or activities that are essential and those that are non-essential.
- Divide your list of daily tasks and responsibilities into three categories:
 1. Essential
 2. Important
 3. Less Important
- Only move to those tasks on the *Less Important* category when you are done with all the tasks in the first two categories. Remember that you do not have to complete everything on your list.

Time management is a very important skill to have. Ineffective time management can lead to stress, anxiety, burnout and eventually illness.

- If you are serious about achieving a more relaxed lifestyle, you will need to put down time on your *Essential* list.

Delegation

- This skill involves letting someone else take care of a task or activity that has lower priority for you, or is an important task that you do not have to do personally.
- Delegation may mean distributing tasks equitably among family members or co-workers.
- A key to delegation is a willingness to trust and rely on others' capabilities. You must be willing to let go. You have to give up the idea that you are the only one that can do the job.

Allowing Extra Time

- A common problem is underestimating the time required to complete a task.
- The result is you end up rushing to try and get something done, or else run into overtime and encroach on time that was needed for the next activity in your schedule.
- As a general rule, it helps to allow a little more time than you would expect for each activity during the day.
- An important key for allowing extra time is to be willing to do fewer things. This may be difficult for people who are addicted to their own adrenaline, who seem to get a certain exhilaration and fulfillment from rushing around or feeling busy.

Letting Go of Perfectionism

- Perfectionism arises from setting your standards and expectations too high. There is no allowance for the inevitable mistakes, frustrations, delays and limitations that come up in the process of working towards any goal.
- Letting go of perfectionism requires a fundamental attitude shift.
- The new standard is to simply do your best. Making mistakes along the way is okay. Accept the results you get, even if your efforts fall short of expectation.

Overcoming Procrastination

- Procrastination is self-defeating because it ends up leaving you with too little time...always.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC Clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

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- The solution is to jump in and get started whether or not you are feeling ready to do it.
- People typically find that once they get started, it is not so bad.

Saying “No”

- Many people have difficulty saying no or setting limits.
- Difficulty saying no is tied up to your self-image. If your image requires you to be nice all the time and always available to everyone, then there is probably no limit to what others will ask you to do.
- Learning to say no requires a willingness to relinquish cherished beliefs about yourself. This can be a very hard thing to do.
- It requires accepting that taking care of yourself, even at the expense of what you can do for others, is not selfish.

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