

Practice forms of relaxation response

MANAGING STRESS



Relaxing breath

It has long been known that breathing correctly is not only good for your health but also good for managing stress. Try this breathing exercise.

- Focus on your breathing as you take in one deep cleansing breath. Now inhale counting to 4, hold for 7, and then exhale counting to 8.
- Continue this technique as you inhale through the nose and exhale through the mouth. Hold the tip of your tongue behind your upper teeth. Repeat this cycle four times, and then breathe normally. Make an effort to become aware of how you feel.
- Continue this breathing technique, inhaling and exhaling for short or long intervals of time, or until you feel relaxed.

Calming counting breath

Take a moment to focus yourself, and notice your breathing as it is, and

- Relax into a comfortable position. Begin *deep, slow, quiet, and regular breathing*. Make a conscious effort to slow your breathing down. Try counting as you inhale, for example from one to four. Then, as you exhale, count back down from *four to one*. Repeat this over and over. If you get lost, just start again.
- Think on a positive experience and bring a gentle smile to the corners of your mouth.
- Continue this breathing technique for several minutes or as long as you need.

- Getting distracted while doing this is not 'failure'. It is an opportunity to practice gently returning your awareness to what you are focusing on.

Mindfulness meditation

Being able to rest in the moment can relieve stress. As you do this exercise, be attentive to the distractions around you. As you focus on your breathing do the following:

- Assume a comfortable position. Your spine should be straight and your shoulders relaxed.
- Close your eyes if this feels comfortable.
- Bring your attention to your belly. Feel the rise and fall of your body with each breath you take. Feel the sensations in your nose and lungs.
- Keep returning your focus on your breathing. Feel the wave of the breath in and out, moment to moment.
- Notice when your mind wanders. Make a note of the distractions, and gently return awareness to your breathing. If thoughts reappear, let them float away like clouds.

4 Steps to stop the stress reaction

Some reactions to stress include anxiety, fear and depression. To stop the stress reaction, practice the following steps:

1. Bring a small smile to your face at the corners of your mouth and eyes. This '*Inner Smile*' stops the outward frown.

2. Instead of holding your breath, gently fill your diaphragm. This is the space in your belly.
3. Then, gently exhale while relaxing your jaw and lowering your shoulders away from your ears.
4. End this exercise by imagining the breath in your belly flowing out and down your arms. Feel the warmth in your hands and tension released.

Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is another effective and widely used strategy for stress relief. It involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face.

- First, loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away from your foot. How does it feel as it becomes limp and loose?
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Continue this technique by slowly moving up through your body — legs, abdomen, back, neck, face — contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.

Practice progressive muscle relaxation regularly. It can help you feel what tension and complete relaxation feels like. This awareness helps you spot and deal with the first signs of muscular

tension. Tension in different parts of the body may come with stress. As your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for further relief from stress.

Massage therapy

Different kinds of massage are another tool to combat stress. Although self-massage is good for stress relief, getting a massage from a professional massage therapist can be relaxing. It can also be more thorough than what you can do yourself. When booking a massage, try types like Swedish or Shiatsu. These forms of massage promote overall relaxation. Deep tissue and sports massages are more intense. They often target specific areas and may leave you sore for a couple of days. This can make them less effective for relaxation and stress relief. If you are on a budget, look around for massage schools. They often provide massages at reduced prices while training students. Here are a few self-massages you can try.

- **Scalp soother:** place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.
- **Easy on the eyes:** close your eyes and place your ring fingers directly under your eyebrows, near the bridge of your nose. Slowly increase the pressure for 5-10 seconds, then gently release. Repeat 2-3 times.
- **Sinus pressure relief:** place your fingertips at the bridge of your nose. Slowly slide your fingers down your nose and across the top of your cheekbones to the outside of your eyes.
- **Shoulder tension relief:** reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

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