Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation is not just about having peace of mind or taking a break. Taking time to learn relaxation techniques can have significant health benefits and improve your overall quality of life.

**Health benefits of relaxation:**
- Slower heart rate
- Lower blood pressure
- Improved digestion
- Regulated blood sugar levels
- Reduced stress hormones
- Improved circulation
- Reduced tension
- Reduced chronic pain
- Improved concentration and mood
- Improved sleep quality
- Reduced fatigue
- Reduced anger and/or frustration
- Boost in confidence

Relaxation can occur in many different ways. Often, relaxation techniques shift your focus onto something calming and increase your bodily awareness. Using these techniques is easy, cheap, and can be done almost anywhere.

**Stretching**
When you experience something stressful, your muscles tend to tense up making it difficult to relax. Stretching has been proven to decrease blood pressure and relax tight muscles. Stretching can be done easily at home, work, or school. Fitness practices like yoga or Pilates are other options to explore relaxing stretching methods.

**Deep Breathing**
When stressed, your breathing may become shallow. This limits the diaphragm's range of motion and ability to inhale adequate oxygenated air. By focusing on your breath, you can increase the volume of oxygen inhaled and exchanged in the lungs to achieve deeper relaxation. Deep breathing is also called diaphragmatic breathing, abdominal breathing, belly breathing, or paced respiration.

**Deep Breathing Technique:**
1. Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down.
2. Close your eyes and place your hands on your belly.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose, filling your chest and belly with air. Let your belly expand.
4. You may want to hold the breath for 2-3 seconds at this point.
5. Breathe out slowly through your mouth or nose.
6. Repeat as long as desired

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**
Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) not only relaxes the mind, but it also relaxes the entire body. It is used to help control stress, anxiety, relieve insomnia, and symptoms of chronic pain. This technique requires tensing and releasing different muscle groups in succession. It’s especially helpful for people who “carry” their anxiety or stress in their muscles. Other conditions that may benefit from PMR include tension headaches, backaches, tightness in the jaw and face, high blood pressure, and digestive disturbances.

PMR involves tensing and holding each muscle group for 5 seconds, followed by 10 seconds of relaxation. This is repeated 3 times per muscle group before moving on to the next group (e.g. tense muscles in arms and then moving to legs). The goal of this practice is to notice differences between times of tension and times of relaxation. Maintaining focus on how your muscles feel is the key to success.
**Guided Imagery**

Guided imagery is a way to focus your imagination on calm, peaceful images to provide a mental break and a sense of relaxation in your body. It is a powerful strategy that can help your coping skills. It is sometimes used in therapy to assist patients overcome fears and anxiety. Music or soothing nature sounds can also be used to enhance a guided imagery session.

**Guided Imagery Technique:**

1. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. Hold for 2 seconds, and then exhale slowly.

2. While continuing to take deep breaths, visualize yourself participating in a desirable activity. Some common examples might be walking through a forest, laying on a beach, or sitting on a mountaintop.

3. While you are visualizing, try to translate this image to your other senses as well. Can you imagine sand between your toes? Can you smell fresh flowers? Do you hear waterfalls in the distance? Is the sun beaming on your face? Your vision can be as intricate or as simple as you would like it to be.

4. After you have spent the desired amount of time on your image, remove yourself from the vision by imagining walking back to your original location such as work, your home, your room, etc.

5. Inhale and exhale just as you did at the beginning and slowly open your eyes.

The aim of this practice is to experience a sense of peace and let go of anxiety or stress in your situation. Perhaps you also experienced creativity or feel more in control of your circumstances. If guided imagery does not come easily to you, don’t worry. This exercise may help you identify the stressors in your environment that could prevent you from completing the visualization process. Either way, you learned something new about yourself and your environment.

**Other relaxation techniques**

In addition to the techniques mentioned in this brochure, there are other relaxation techniques that may fit well with your lifestyle. These include but are not limited to: massage, meditation, tai chi, music and art therapy, aromatherapy or hydrotherapy. Like any exercise, these techniques take practice. Be patient with yourself, and stop a technique if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

You can find additional resources to any of these techniques online or at a library. There are also many apps you can download on your phone to help guide you through these relaxation techniques.

**References**

- www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed
- health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood
- mayoclinic.org
- cdc.gov