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Relaxation techniques: Learn ways to reduce your stress

By Mayo Clinic staff

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Relaxation techniques: Learn ways to reduce your stress

Relaxation techniques can reduce stress symptoms and help you enjoy a better quality of life. Explore relaxation techniques you can do on your own.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Relaxation techniques are an essential part of 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 on your mind and body from the challenges and hassles of daily life.

Whether your stress is spiraling out of control or you've already got it tamed, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques is easy, often free or low cost, and poses little risk. 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 might miss out on the health benefits of relaxation.

Practicing relaxation techniques can reduce stress symptoms by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Lowering blood pressure

- Slowing your breathing rate
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension and chronic pain
- Improving concentration
- Reducing anger and frustration
- Boosting confidence to handle problems

Types of relaxation techniques

Health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach various relaxation techniques. But if you prefer, you also can learn some relaxation techniques on your own.

In general, relaxation techniques involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly to reap the benefits.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation 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 feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this relaxation technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method is 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 relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other common relaxation techniques include:

- Yoga

- Tai chi
- Listening to 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 you start to feel stress symptoms. 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 — don't let your effort to practice relaxation techniques become yet another stressor.

Also, bear in mind that some people, especially those with serious psychological issues and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during some relaxation techniques. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional or mental health provider.

References

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