
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Relaxation Fact Sheet

What Is Deep Relaxation?

Deep relaxation is an active skill that you can learn in order to gain better control over your body. The objective of deep relaxation is to relieve tension. It decreases the wear and tear of life's challenges on the mind and body. Deep relaxation is more complex than unwinding in a bathtub, or in front of the TV at the end of a long day. Deep relaxation is not produced solely in response to listening to quiet music, reading a good book, or restful sleeping, though these activities can be relaxing.

Deep relaxation (also known as the "relaxation response") is a specific state that is the opposite of a state of tension triggered by stress. It consists of several physical changes in your body that include a decrease in heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and respiration (breathing) rate.

What are the Health Benefits of Deep Relaxation?

In addition to decreasing muscle tension and blood pressure, deep relaxation has several benefits that have been documented time and again over the last 30 years. These include:

- reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression
- improved sleep
- increased energy and motivation
- improved concentration and memory
- prevention/reduction of stress-related medical problems (e.g., headache, TMJ, digestion problems)
- decreased pain

Why Is Relaxation Important?

Our bodies are designed to respond automatically to stress. This response, referred to as the "fight-or-flight response", consists of a predictable pattern of physical changes that prepare you to deal with perceived threat or danger (by fighting or fleeing). Some of these changes include:

- increased muscle tension to enhance performance

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- release of adrenaline & other hormones to power the muscles
- increased peripheral vision for alertness
- increased heart rate & blood pressure to distribute fuel to muscles & brain
- increased levels of blood sugar for energy & heightened activity
- decreased digestion to conserve energy

When the perceived threat or stress is gone, the body automatically returns to a balanced, resting state. However, for some people who experience prolonged or multiple sources of stress, the body does not fully return to this balanced state. Instead, the fight or flight response continues to work “overtime” which can result in negative consequences to your health (i.e., important bodily functions such as digestion, reproduction, tissue growth and repair, and immune function begin to wear down or malfunction). The relaxation response can assist you in quieting the body’s response to stress. It can prevent some of the “wear and tear” that can come from prolonged or excessive fight-or-flight reactions.

How it Works:

Unlike the fight-or-flight response, the relaxation response is not automatic. Relaxation is a skill that requires training and practice, just like learning to ride a bicycle, play golf, or swim. The body responds to stress with muscle tension, which in turn increases the likelihood of experiencing anxiety or other negative emotions. So, by reducing muscle tension in your body, you can create a competing, adaptive response that is, by definition, incompatible with a state of anxiety. Learning the habit of responding with relaxation blocks the habit of responding with anxiety. Because stress has both physical and psychological components that interact with one another, learning to reduce the physical part helps to reduce the emotional part.

Methods

Deep relaxation can be produced by focusing the mind on a repetitive word, phrase, breath, or action, and adopting a passive attitude towards distracting thoughts that come to mind while you practice. There are several methods of achieving the relaxation response. Your primary care team includes a behavioral health provider who is an expert in relaxation training methods. These include:

- abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing
- progressive muscle relaxation
- cue-controlled relaxation
- autogenic training
- visualization/guided imagery
- meditation
- yoga
- hypnosis
- biofeedback