

RELAXATION: Benefits & Tips

The goal of relaxation is to reduce the effects of stress on your health. Since chronic pain produces chronic stress on the body, it is important to regularly practice relaxation techniques that can help your mind and body recover. Relaxation is more than resting or enjoying a hobby – it involves using specific strategies to reduce tension.

Benefits of Relaxation

Relaxation is important for good health. When you are relaxed, your muscles are loose, your heart rate is normal, and your breathing is slow and deep. Learning how to relax can help especially when you feel pain. Relaxation prompts your body to release chemicals that reduce pain and produce a sense of well-being.

Relaxation won't cure pain or other chronic symptoms, but skills that relax the body and the mind may help decrease muscle tension, prevent muscle spasms, and relieve the stress that can aggravate pain and other symptoms.

Taking time to relax and refuel your energy provides benefits such as:

- Improved mood
- Increased energy and productivity
- Improved concentration and focus
- Improved sense of control over stress and daily demands
- Improved nighttime sleep
- Increased self-confidence
- Greater ability to handle problems
- Decreased anxiety and other negative emotions such as anger and frustration
- Increased blood flow to muscles and reduced muscle tension
- Lower blood pressure, breathing rate, and heart rate
- Decreased pain, such as headaches and back pain

Relaxation Practice Tips

Relaxation is a skill that requires practice. You may not feel the benefits immediately, so don't give up! Remain patient and motivated and you'll reduce the negative impacts of stress. And remember: If relaxation feels foreign or unnatural, that likely means you are a person who needs it most!

Establish a routine

- Set aside time to practice relaxation at least once or twice a day.
- Pairing relaxation with a regular activity may help you remember to practice (for example, take 10 relaxed breaths before bed or whenever you sit down to eat).

- Practice at various times throughout the day until relaxation becomes natural and you can use it readily when you feel stressed. You may want to leave "reminders" for yourself to relax (for example, sticky notes on the bathroom mirror, kitchen cabinets, or car dashboard with the words "relax" or "breathe").

Be comfortable

- Practice on a comfortable chair, sofa, mat, or bed. Dim the lights.
- Loosen tight clothing and remove shoes, belt, glasses or contact lenses, if you like.

Concentrate

- Eliminate disruptions. Turn off the TV, radio, or telephone. Practice in a quiet, calm, environment.
- Close your eyes to reduce distractions and improve concentration. If you prefer, keep your eyes open and focus on one spot.
- Move your body as little as possible, changing positions only for comfort.
- Don't worry if you have some distracting thoughts—it happens to everyone. Just notice that your thoughts have wandered and then gently, without judgment, return your attention to your breath.

Relax

- Begin and end relaxation practices with relaxed breathing techniques.
- Use a relaxation CD if it helps. Gradually, learn to relax without a CD so that you can use relaxation techniques anywhere.
- Let relaxation proceed naturally and spread throughout your body. Do not try to resist it.

Be patient

- Give yourself time to learn relaxation skills. Practice is required for these techniques to become automatic.
- Try not to become upset if you have trouble concentrating. A wandering mind is normal and expected. Keep bringing your attention back to your breath.
- Don't worry about how well you are practicing.
- After a few weeks, select a word, such as "calm," "relax," "peace," or "patience" that you can say during relaxation practices. Eventually, simply saying that word may help you relax.

Incorporate relaxation into daily life

- Over time, move relaxation practices from planned, quiet settings to "real life." The goal is to be able to calm yourself when necessary, no matter where you are.
- Use relaxation whenever you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious, such as waiting in line, at a doctor's appointment, or during a difficult meeting.