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**Relaxation Techniques**

**What are relaxation techniques?**

Relaxation techniques are ways of quieting the body and calming the mind. They help you deal with stress, anxiety, and the pressures of everyday life.

**What kinds of people need relaxation techniques?**

Anyone can use relaxation techniques when coping with stress. Relaxation techniques are especially important if you are hard-driving, tend to do too much, do not take lunch breaks, have several things to do and not enough time to do them, and cannot stand failure. You may become impatient in traffic jams or when waiting in line, often try harder than others, and get angry at others easily.

**What are signs that relaxation techniques would be helpful?**

A pounding heart, dry throat and mouth, and sweating may be warning signs of stress when they occur without a physical cause (such as exercise). Other signs of stress include:

* general irritability or annoyance
* difficulty concentrating
* an urge to run or hide
* trembling
* feeling "keyed up"
* not sleeping or sleeping too much
* being easily startled by small sounds
* feeling pressure from inside yourself to be constantly productive
* feeling out of control

**What can I do to relax?**

All methods of relaxing have one or more of the following four components:

* relaxing the major muscle groups of the body
* slowing down breathing
* imagining a pleasant scene
* creating repetitive thoughts or motions.

Deep muscle relaxation has been shown to help reduce tension headaches, as well as jaw, neck, and low back pain. Controlled breathing reduces anxiety, and can help you to go back to the issue at hand with a more relaxed and open attitude. Relaxation techniques require practice; allow at least 20 minutes a day. To practice progressive muscle relaxation:

* Make sure your bladder is empty.
* Sit in a quiet place in a relaxed position with both feet on the floor.
* Close your eyes. Relax your arms and hands in your lap.
* Start to slow down your breathing, being aware of each breath and the air as it comes in and goes out of your lungs.
* Starting with the muscles of your feet, take time to relax each muscle group of your body. Working upward, relax the muscles of your legs, bottom, stomach, lower back, arms and shoulders, neck, head, and face. Do this slowly, while breathing more and more slowly.
* If any area of your body (such as your shoulders or your stomach or forehead) is apt to be tight and tense, pay special attention to relaxing it.
* Say a single, relaxing word to yourself over and over again, like "relax" or "quiet."
* When all the muscles of your body are relaxed, survey your body for any tension and imagine yourself breathing the tension out.
* Imagine yourself floating down an escalator, and reaching deeper and deeper levels of relaxation as you go down.
* At the bottom, imagine yourself in any safe, quiet place you choose, perhaps a beach with palm trees or a mountain meadow. The important thing is that it is a comfortable place for you.
* Imagine all the details of your comfortable space while you are breathing slowly and with your muscles fully relaxed.
* Stay there as long as you want and when you are ready, come back slowly, gradually opening your eyes, stretching, and starting to move.

**What are some coping strategies for dealing with stress?**

* Practice a short form of the above relaxation technique, taking a few seconds or minutes to relax several times a day.
* Carry a card with these words on it, and look at it several times a day: "I am calm and relaxed."
* Take deep slow breaths often, while on the phone, in the car, or waiting for someone.
* Say "no" when asked to do something you do not want to do.
* Take time to be with nature, music, and children.
* Make sure there are empty spaces in your life where nothing is demanded of you.
* Exercise regularly.
* Get at least 7 to 8 hours sleep each night.
* Limit caffeine, alcohol, and sugar in your diet.

If you have serious problems from muscle tension, see your healthcare provider. Your provider may treat you or refer you to a physical therapist or physiologist.

If you would like to learn more about relaxation techniques, check your local community college or community center. They may offer classes in these and other relaxation techniques.

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[References](http://www.merckmedicus.com/pp/us/hcp/hcp_patient_resource_allhandouts_content_search.jsp?pg=/ppdocs/us/common/crs/aha/aha_relax_bha_refs.htm)   
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