

Techniques to de-stress and bring calm into your life

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Relaxation techniques are a great way to help 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 of life's challenges on your mind and body.

Whether you have a lot of stress in your life or you've got it under control, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques isn't hard. 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 may miss out on the health benefits of relaxation. Practicing relaxation techniques can improve how you physically respond to stress by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Lowering blood pressure
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Reducing the need for oxygen
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension

You may also gain these overall health and lifestyle benefits from relaxation techniques:

- Fewer physical symptoms, such as headaches and back pain
- Fewer emotional responses, such as anger and frustration
- More energy
- Improved concentration
- Greater ability to handle problems
- More efficiency in daily activities

Types of relaxation techniques

Although health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach relaxation techniques, you can also learn some on your own. Relaxation techniques usually involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly. There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

- **Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this 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 different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation, and you become more aware of physical sensations. You may choose 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 technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. Try to use as many senses as you can, including smells, sights, sounds and textures. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about the warmth of the sun, the sound of crashing waves, the feel of the grains of sand and the smell of salt water. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other relaxation techniques include those you may be more familiar with, such as:

- Yoga
- Tai chi
- 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 your muscles start to tense. 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. Stay motivated to reduce the negative impact of stress on your body and to experience a greater sense of calm in your life.

And bear in mind that some people, especially those with significant psychological problems and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation exercises, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional.