

# Relaxation Tips to Help You Beat Stress

Stress is unavoidable. We carry stress with us in our bodies, as everyday pressures cause our muscles to tense up. Too much stress can make you physically ill and leave you at greater risk for serious conditions such as heart disease and depression. There are many effective ways to relieve stress. Some methods require instruction by qualified teachers; others you can do on your own as you go through your busy day.

## The importance of relaxation

For some, the notion of relaxation may seem undeserved or feel like an unproductive use of time or even a chore; for others, it may simply seem too difficult to quiet the mind enough to relax. But learning to relax is one of the best ways to deal with stress and its physical and emotional symptoms. Relaxation gives your body and mind a chance to calm down and recuperate from stress. It can also help you manage pain, get an energy boost, or just feel better in general. Here are some other potential benefits of relaxation:

- decreased muscle tension
- lowered blood pressure
- increased energy
- decreased irritability
- increased ability to concentrate
- better sleep
- slower breathing and heart rate
- a general feeling of wellbeing

The key to learning how to relax is to find one or several strategies that work well for you.

## Therapies you can do on your own

Some methods are very simple, such as taking a few minutes to just sit quietly. Other methods may require instruction and practice because you need to tune in to and teach your body to shift into a relaxed state. The key is to keep trying. For many people, first attempts at relaxing may be less fulfilling than hoped for. But as you experiment to find what works for you and practice, you'll find yourself more and more able to relieve tension any time you want to.

First, find a comfortable place, free of distraction.

**Deep breathing.** Concentrate on your breathing. Inhale with slow, deep breaths through your nose, and slowly exhale through your mouth. Imagine calmness entering your body with every inhalation and tension leaving your body with every exhalation. Counting each breath will help you stay connected to your breathing. Try to extend your exhale to be a few seconds longer than you inhale.

**Progressive muscle relaxation.** Lie down on a bed, sofa, or floor—anywhere you can comfortably stretch out. Breathe in and out slowly and deeply while you concentrate on each of the muscle groups in your body one at a time. Starting at your toes and working your way up your legs, and continuing through your body to your neck and face, contract each muscle area for 3-5 seconds and feel the tension as you breathe in, and then concentrate on letting it go on the exhale. Gradually your entire body will be completely relaxed.

**Meditation.** Many ways to meditate have been developed over thousands of years. Meditation offers techniques and practices for attaining inner peace by focusing on images, sounds, or breathing. For instance, you might take a few minutes in a quiet place to close your eyes and quietly focus on a mental image, such as walking on a beach or in a wooded area, or on an object that calms you. Or try the techniques described in the cardiologist Herbert Benson's classic *The Relaxation Response*, based on studies at Harvard Medical School.

**Stretching.** Tension builds up in the muscles throughout your body. Just a few minutes a day of slowly and gently stretching your muscles can relieve a lot of that tension. Hold each position for 30 seconds. Don't stretch too hard—you want to feel the muscles extended, but not pulled.

**Exercise.** It doesn't have to be very strenuous. Even a quick walk around the block can help to relieve tension. Find a physical activity that works for you and do it at least a couple of times a week. Work up to 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise on all or most days of the week.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is a way of becoming more aware of the moment without making judgments that can get in the way of being fully present. You can try to become more mindful on your own by, for example, slowing down and savoring the taste of each bite of a meal instead of rushing through it. Or you can take a course in mindfulness or read a helpful book, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn's *Wherever You Go, There You Are*.

**Massage.** Massaging muscles can relieve tension and help your muscles relax. You can get a professional massage, or you can rub the tension out of your neck and shoulders yourself any time you feel tight. Remember to take a moment to stop what you are doing and concentrate on relaxing while you massage your neck and shoulders.

## Other relaxation therapies and activities

Some people find it helpful to take classes or learn about more structured relaxation therapies, such as yoga or tai chi. These methods require some training, so you will benefit most by working with someone trained in the specific method you're interested in learning.

### Yoga

Yoga began in India almost 5,000 years ago as a spiritual practice, but you don't have to be in search of enlightenment to get the physical and mental benefits that practicing yoga provides. Yoga postures, breathing exercises, and meditation combine to provide stress relief and improved physical fitness. Yoga can also increase flexibility; help with high blood pressure and circulatory problems; relieve back and neck pain; and improve conditions like asthma, fatigue, insomnia, arthritis, rheumatism, and anxiety.

There are several different traditions of yoga, but they all combine postures, stretching, breathing, and meditation to make your body and mind relax. Some of the postures are difficult—never force your body to do something it's not ready for. A yoga instructor will be able to help you adapt the postures for your abilities.

### **Tai chi**

Tai chi movements are taken from Chinese martial arts and are based on the principle that the human body has an energy flow, called *chi*, which can become blocked. The purpose of the tai chi exercises is to unblock the chi and restore its natural flow. Like yoga, tai chi relies on postures and breathing to increase circulation and promote healing and relaxation in the body. And as with yoga, there are several styles of tai chi. In tai chi, you slowly and smoothly move from one position to the next in a specific order. There are up to 108 separate movements, but beginners can usually find a short form that uses between 20 and 40 movements. Learning the proper movements is best done under the guidance of a trained tai chi instructor.

### **The Alexander technique**

The Alexander technique was developed in the 1890s by F. Matthias Alexander. It involves relearning how to use your muscles while doing everyday activities so your body works more efficiently and with less tension and strain. The Alexander technique may help people who have stress, fatigue, insomnia, anxiety, depression, neck and back pain, circulatory disorders, chronic muscle tension, digestive disorders, and voice and breathing problems. Contact the [American Society for the Alexander Technique](#) to learn more and to find an Alexander Technique instructor in your community.

### **The Feldenkrais Method**

The [Feldenkrais Method](#) was developed by Moshe Feldenkrais in the 1940s. He combined his expertise in judo with his knowledge of the Alexander technique to create a system that uses gentle exercise motions to increase flexibility, stretch and strengthen muscles, and relax the body. Group lessons teach movement, while one-on-one sessions with an instructor help you become more aware of your body movements. The idea behind the Feldenkrais Method is to free your mind and body from ways of thinking and moving that don't work well for you.

You may have to try a few different methods of relaxation before you find the one that's right for you. Or you may just enjoy a variety of options. But when you do find the perfect relaxation method, you will benefit both physically and mentally from reducing the tension that comes with life's everyday challenges.

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