

Relaxation techniques

Some of us are physically affected by stress – our breathing becomes rapid, our muscles start to tense, and our heart beats faster. Relaxation techniques can help you to manage these uncomfortable symptoms, and can also be useful if you struggle to get to sleep.

Relaxation is a skill that can be learned, and it can be very reassuring to know that you have something you can do when things get too much. These strategies form part of your “tool box” to cope with stress and anxiety as it arises.

Here are some evidence-based relaxation techniques you can try out. Here are some things to remember as you work through them:

- **These techniques take time to practise** – they won’t necessarily work very well for you the first time, but after a few times, you may start to see the difference
- **Not every technique will work for everyone** – this process is about finding the right one for you.
- **You might need to combine these with other techniques** – such as distraction techniques or other thought management strategies.

Controlled breathing

Controlled breathing is an exercise you can try to tackle hyperventilation – the rapid and shallow breathing that is a natural response to stress. Hyperventilation can be alarming when you don’t know how to control it, and can lead to other symptoms such as dizziness or chest pain, so it’s important to know how to tackle it.

You can practise this exercise seating, standing or lying down on the floor. Make sure you’re as comfortable as possible. It can help to place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach to feel the difference when you breathe deeply.

1. Breathe in through your nose slowly and steadily. Allow your stomach to expand as much as possible – this shows that the air is going into your lungs.
2. Breathe slowly and steadily out through your mouth.
3. Each time you breathe, try to count to five to make sure you’re keeping your breathing steady.

Practise this technique whenever you can. At first, the exercise might feel strange and you might not be used to the sensations you're experiencing. Practising regularly can help to normalise these feelings and improve your technique.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a well-established technique invented by Dr. Edmund Jacobson in the 1920s.

There are a number of evidence-based muscle relaxation exercises to help you deal with muscle stiffness caused by stress. Progressive Muscle Relaxation takes the longest, but it's important to learn it first so that you can successfully carry out shorter versions of the exercise.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation involves taking each part of your body and going through the same cycle:

- Tensing the muscles without straining them, and concentrating on the sensation for around five seconds.
- Relaxing the muscles, and concentrating on the feeling of relaxation for around 15 seconds. Notice the difference between how the muscles are now, compared to how they felt when you tensed them.

To master the technique you'll need to practice it twice a day, making sure you give yourself a space that is quiet and comfortable so that you can go through the whole exercise without disturbance. Eventually, you'll be able to try a shortened version to target specific muscles (see below).

Release-only relaxation

Release-only relaxation is a shortened form of PMR where you skip out the "tense" stage and focus only on relaxing each muscle group one at a time. You should only move onto this technique once you've mastered PMR, and you can clearly tell the difference between tensed and relaxed muscles.

The Relaxation Response

This method was popularised by Dr Herbert Benson and is designed as an alternative to the "fight or flight" response that we are adapted to do. The idea is to learn the technique and eventually be able to employ it in response to a stressful situation. The exercise is designed to be easier to carry out wherever you are and whatever position you're in – standing, seated, or lying down.

There are four things that can help bring about the relaxation response:

- **A calm, quiet environment.** This is helpful to carrying out the exercise but isn't always available.
- **A mental device.** This is something to keep your mind focussed on to prevent it wandering while you carry out the exercise. It could be a word you repeat over and over, a song you play in your head, or a memory or scene you play out.
- **A passive mind.** This means that you adopt a "let it happen" attitude when thoughts occur and allow them to pass you by.
- **A comfortable position.** It's best to be in a seated position for this exercise.

To carry out the relaxation response:

1. Close your eyes
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose, becoming aware of your breathing.
3. Breathe slowly out through your mouth.
4. Keep your mental device in mind as you breathe.
5. Don't worry about distracting thoughts or whether you're doing the exercise well. Just allow thoughts to occur and pass by.
6. Continue until you feel you are relaxed and are ready to stop. Dr Benson advises trying the exercise for 10 to 20 minutes, but you may be able to become relaxed in a shorter period with practice.
7. Once you're ready to stop, keep your eyes closed and stay in a sitting position for a few minutes, then open your eyes.

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