



RELAXATION TRAINING

Learning relaxation skills is like learning any other skill such as swimming, golfing, or bicycle riding. In order to get better at it, you have to practice it. It is very important to understand that relaxation training involves learning on your part. There is nothing magical about these procedures; all they require are a commitment. Without active cooperation and regular practice, these procedures will, unfortunately, likely be of little use.

Three main methods of relaxation are Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Deep Breathing Exercises and Visualization. Depending on your preferences, you may feel more comfortable with one method over another. Also, you can combine methods to deepen your relaxation, for example use deep breathing with visualization techniques. The choice is yours. The key, as always, is to stick to it and practice everyday.

Method 1 - Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Introduction to Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This method will help you to attain a deep feeling of relaxation through systematically tensing and relaxing the muscles of your body. Although many people feel foolish, or frustrated, or confused when they first attempt to use progressive muscle relaxation techniques, once these techniques are learned they can be very helpful in reducing not only muscular tension, but intrusive thoughts.

The strength of this technique rests on the basic premise that the mind and body are connected and affect each other:

Anxious/Tense Thoughts $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ Anxious /Tense Body

Relaxed /Calm Thoughts $\leftarrow\rightarrow$ Relaxed/Calm Body

In addition, anxiety is incompatible with deep muscle relaxation. You can therefore reduce psychological anxiety and stress by reducing muscle tension.

Instructions for Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

Basically, this method consists of learning to sequentially tense, and then relax, four groups of muscles in the body. At the same time, you pay very close attention to the feelings associated with both tensing and relaxing your muscles. A useful side effect of this exercise is that you will learn to pinpoint tension and relaxation as they appear in everyday situations as well.

1. Practice this procedure ideally twice per day, perhaps in the afternoon and immediately before bed, for about 10-20 minutes per practice session. Always practice at the same time each day. You should start feeling a generalized relaxation in your everyday life after about 1 or 2 months. You will also notice that the time it takes to attain a deep level of relaxation will decrease.
2. Find a nice, calm place to practice, where distractions are minimal.
3. Practice on an empty stomach, as digestion has a tendency to interfere with relaxation
4. Lie down in a comfortable position, where your whole body is well supported
5. Loosen your clothing if it prevents you from being comfortable
6. Make the conscious decision to not worry about your performance for the next 20 minutes
7. Adopt a passive and detached attitude. Don't "try to relax" by controlling your body. Let it come naturally. Don't judge your performance.
8. Concentrate completely on your bodily sensations: the tightening of your muscles, and the sensation associated with letting them relax

The 4 Muscle Groups

Group One:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Right hand and forearm (clench fist) | 3. Left hand and forearm |
| 2. Right biceps (push down) | 4. Left biceps |

Group Two:

- | | |
|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 5. Forehead (raise eyebrows) | 7. Jaw (pull corners of mouth back) |
| 6. Eyes (squint) and nose (wrinkle up) | 8. Neck (push back) |

Group 3:

- 9. Chest, shoulders, and upper back (plus deep breath)
- 10. Stomach (plus deep breath)

Group 4:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|
| 11. Right thigh (lift and hold) | 14. Left thigh |
| 12. Right calf (toes point up) | 15. Left calf |
| 13. Right foot (point toes down) | 16. Left foot |

For each muscle group, do the following 2 times:

1. Focus all of your attention on the muscle group
2. At the signal, tense that muscle group, and maintain tension for a period of 5-7 seconds max. (this duration is shorter in the case of the feet). Focus on the feelings associated with tension in that muscle group. Feel the muscle pull, notice what it's like to feel tension in these muscles as they pull and remain hard and tight
3. At the signal, the tension in that muscle group is released.
4. Maintain all of your attention on the muscle group as it relaxes, for about 30-40 seconds. Just let the muscles go, and notice the difference between tension and relaxation, focusing all of your attention on the feeling in this muscle group as it becomes more and more relaxed

Special considerations:

1. Do not tighten the muscles excessively. You are not trying to bring your muscles to the verge of damage.
2. Over-tightening the toes or feet can sometimes lead to muscle cramping, so tighten your muscles gently, and keep it comfortable.
3. When relaxing the tension, let go instantly. Let your muscles become suddenly limp.

Method 2 – Deep Breathing Exercises

Improper breathing is sometimes a contributing factor to anxiety, panic attacks, depression, muscle tension, headaches, and fatigue. Thus, breathing awareness and good breathing habits can enhance your physical and psychological well being, reduce your stress, and reduce worrisome thoughts that interfere with sleep.

Most people usually breathe in one of two ways, one good and one bad:

- (a) chest or thoracic breathing or
- (b) abdominal or diaphragmatic breathing.

A) Chest or Thoracic Breathing

This type of breathing is often associated with anxiety or other emotional distress. Chest breathing is often shallow, rapid and irregular. Anxious people may experience breath holding, hyperventilation, or shortness of breath.

B) Abdominal or Diaphragmatic Breathing

This type of breathing is the natural breathing of newborn babies and sleeping adults. The air is inhaled deeply into the lungs and exhaled as the diaphragm contracts and expands. Breathing is even and non-constricted.

How to Use This Information to Reduce Stress

Increase your awareness of your own breathing patterns. Shift to a more abdominal breathing. This will help reduce muscle tension and anxiety. But remember: practice and time are the key elements. Give yourself enough time to feel the effects of the following breathing exercises. As with any other technique, although some benefits will be experienced immediately, the truly profound effects of these exercises may not be fully experienced until after months of persistent practice. Give each technique a fair chance, and keep practicing even if you don't feel any immediate effects.

BREATHING EXERCISE 1: Breathing for Awareness and Relaxation:

1. Lie down and close eyes. Put your right hand on your abdomen, at the waistline. Put your left hand on your chest, right at the centre.
2. Do not try to change your breathing pattern at this point. Simply bring your full attention to your breathing. Which hand rises the most as you inhale? If your belly doesn't move or moves less than your chest, then you are breathing from your chest. If your abdomen expands, then you are breathing from your belly or diaphragm.

3. How to shift from chest to abdominal breathing:

1st Method:

- (a) exhale deeply to push out the air from the bottom of your lungs
- (b) You don't even have to think about inhaling, just let the air fill your lungs naturally. This is because the deep exhale creates a vacuum in your lungs, which will automatically pull in a deep, healthy diaphragmatic breath at the next inhalation
- (c) CAUTION: do not repeat this deep exhalation/inhalation too often consecutively, as this is a good way to hyperventilate.

2nd Method:

- (a) press your hand gently down on your abdomen as you exhale. Then, let your abdomen push your hand back up as you inhale deeply.
4. Make sure you are breathing through your nose. Also, make sure that you are not trying to keep your chest too rigid. Allow your chest to follow the movements of your abdomen. Your chest should move only a little.

BREATHING EXERCISE 2: Deep Breathing

1. Pick a comfortable position. (Lying down comfortably on your back is recommended).
2. Place one hand on your chest, and the other on your belly.
3. Inhale gently into your abdomen, through your nose, slowly and deeply. Make the inhalation push up your hand as much as it feels comfortable. Remember, your chest should only move with your abdomen, and only a little.
4. Pause for just a moment.
5. Then, exhale gently through your mouth (or nose, whichever is most natural for you). This will make a nice, gentle whooshing sound like the wind. Remember to keep every part of your body relaxed, including your face, jaw and mouth.
6. Continue in this manner, taking slow, long, deep breaths that raise and lower your abdomen.

7. Keep focused on your breathing, as you become more and more relaxed. You will also notice that your breathing will gradually slow down. Concentrate on (a) your abdomen moving up and down, (b) the air moving in and out of your lungs, and (c) the feeling of relaxation that deep breathing can give you.
8. Practice deep breathing for about 5 to 10 minutes at a time, once or twice a day. After a few weeks, you may want to extend this period to 20 minutes.
9. After a deep breathing exercise, take a little time to compare the tension in your body before and after the exercise.
10. You can also add the following powerful technique of visualization and imagery to this exercise:
 - (a) During the deep breathing exercise, you can imagine that with each inhalation, energy is rushing into your lungs. You can imagine this energy to be clear and transparent, or of any colour you find relaxing.
 - (b) During the brief pause before the exhalation, imagine that this positive energy is flowing out to all parts of your body. If possible, try to form a mental picture of this energizing process.
 - (c) Then exhale gently.

As you become more and more comfortable with breathing into your abdomen, you can start practicing it anytime during the day, and in any position, such as standing in line at the bus stop, or sitting down at your job. You can then practice deep breathing whenever you feel yourself getting tense or anxious.

Method 3 - Visualization and Imagery

We have all heard of "the power of positive thinking" or of "the power of mind over body". Although it is not true that ALL of your thoughts can become reality, there is a grain of truth in the idea of using your mind to help your body... especially to relax.

It is very hard to simply "will" or order your body to sleep. However, with practice, it will become easy to **imagine** relaxation, calmness and sleepiness spreading through every part of your body. You will learn to **visualize** yourself in a beautifully relaxing and sleep inducing place, and all of this combined will surely help you to fall asleep.

Here is a little example to convince you that what you imagine, visualize, and think about can affect your feelings, and consequently your body and actions:

Suppose you are waiting for a friend or loved one to come home for dinner one evening. You've been preparing for a long time, and now you've been waiting for over an hour. The food is getting cold...

What would you be thinking about while you wait? Would you be imagining this person in an accident? Would you see this person knowingly eating with other people? Would you see this person stuck in traffic, wishing for a cell phone to tell you they will be there soon?

Now, the phone rings. You answer... it's the person you've been waiting for!

Can you see, from this example, that how you will react to this phone call and talk to this person will depend on what you were imagining, visualizing, and thinking about for the last hour? That the emotions you would have been feeling for the last hour will affect what you say or do?

If you start thinking about anxiety producing thought, you will become tense. If you think sad thoughts, you feel unhappy. To overcome negative feelings, you can refocus your mind onto positive, happy, relaxing images. There are also health benefits to using imagery and visualization, and this is studied and practiced in cancer and pain medical centres throughout North America.

The imagination is a very powerful thing. Everybody visualizes, whether you realize it or not. In fact, if you are usually anxious or stressed, chances are that you have a very good imagery system already in place! You have simply been using your imagination skills to make yourself more, instead of less, anxious or stressed. Simply remember how good you are at imagining horrible consequences, at seeing yourself in the near future in a financial or social catastrophe. Also remember how seeing yourself in these situations created high levels of negative emotions. If you have the power to do these things, then you can also use this power to create images that relax and calm you, and that help you fall asleep.

TIPS:

1. Allow yourself a lot of time to practice.
2. Imagery is a very personal thing, so pick scenes that you find relaxing. Lying on a beach, floating between the stars or camping in the mountains means different things to different people.
3. When you visualize, try to involve all of your senses, for example, you may want to feel heat, or coolness, hear the roaring of the waves, or the calm winds of a mountaintop.
4. Try this exercise 3 times a day. Be patient, this takes time. It is easiest to practice in the morning or at night while lying in bed. After some practice, you will be able to visualize anywhere you feel you want to relax.

Instructions for Visualization:

1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Try to relax, maybe by using a breathing exercise or Progressive Muscle Relaxation.
3. Imagine yourself in a relaxing, calm environment, where you are in control. Again, this is very personal. Some suggestions are: stand, sit, lie down, float gently or do something relaxing, while surrounded by a nice, peaceful location of your choice. While in this relaxing place, involve all of your senses: Take the time to look around. Feel all of the sensations relating to it. Listen to the sounds. Smell the fragrant odours. (NOTE: if you have trouble involving all of your senses, work on your strongest sense first. The others will be involved in time).
4. While in this relaxing place, imagine a way to make your uncomfortable emotions or physical stress drain out of your body:
 - a. with each inhalation, you draw positive flowing energy from the earth, with each exhalation, negative energy flows out from the top of your head.
 - b. a glowing positive energy of the colour of your choice surrounds your body to make you feel more relaxed and healthier.
 - c. stress can float out of your fingers, toes, and head

- d. each inhalation brings relaxation, each exhalation forces discomfort out
 - e. find a control switch on your body to turn positive emotions up or down.
 - f. see your stress leave your body like a liquid in a shower or a bath down the drain.
5. If you like, you can also use affirmations, which are short positive statements that make you feel better. Use the present tense. Avoid negatives (Do not say "I am not tense", do say "Relaxation is flowing through me"). Other examples are: "My body is becoming more and more relaxed", "I can relax at will", "My body is getting ready to go to sleep", "Peace is within me", "I am feeling more and more tired and sleepy", "Everything in my life will be excellent tomorrow", etc... (Don't think of this as lying to yourself... think of it as using your imagination to make yourself feel better instead of worst!).
6. You can also use metaphorical images. For example, create an image which symbolizes your tension or inability to sleep, and then transform this image into an image symbolizing relaxation or sleepiness. Try to make these images up yourself, although some suggestions are: the colour red for tension, which fades to pale blue for relaxation; the pounding of a jackhammer, which become the hands of a masseuse kneading your muscles; and so on... You can even decide to apply this tension image to a tense muscle, and allow it to develop into your relaxation image.
7. Stay in this place for as long as you like and enjoy the visualization, while the desired relaxing effect takes place.