

Relaxation 101

Ready to rip your hair out? So stressed you can't sleep? Tired of tense muscles? It's time to *relax*. Stress isn't good for you. Mentally, stress causes anxiety, tension and hyperalertness. Prolonged, unmanaged stress leads to irritability, loss of concentration and a weakened immune system. Learning how to relax can counteract these stress responses.

By releasing both physical and mental tension, relaxation restores your mind and body to a balanced state. Breathing exercises and progressive relaxation soothe the body. Guided imagery and visualization install peace of mind, especially when combined with physical relaxation. Striking a balance is the key.

To learn how to relax, try these techniques from Shirley Archer, JD, MA, a Palo Alto, California, wellness educator and fitness specialist who is the author of *The Pilates Deck*, *The Strength & Toning Deck* and *Pilates Fusion: Wellbeing for Body, Mind and Spirit*.

1. Conscious Breathing

Effective physical relaxation methods include simple breathing exercises, progres-

sive relaxation and gentle, static stretching. If you don't have much time, simply take a few moments to focus on your breathing. Mentally "observe" your inhalation and exhalation, without making any effort to control the breath. Pay attention to how the breath moves the body. Notice subtleties, such as whether the chest or belly rises with inhalation, and how the body responds to exhalation. This singular focus brings you into the present moment and into the immediate experience of your body. It often results in slower, deeper diaphragmatic breaths that further relax the body.

2. Progressive Relaxation

After you are comfortable with conscious breathing, try progressive relaxation. It consists of sequentially tensing and relaxing individual muscles. This method helps you develop body awareness and educates you on how to release tension. When you do progressive relaxation, start from the top of the body and progress to the bottom, or vice versa. Proceeding sequentially gives you an easy-to-follow sense of order.

3. Visualization

Mental techniques can also be helpful. Visualization uses images that appeal to the senses—sight, sound, smell, touch and taste—to create mental and physical responses. Visualization involves mentally rehearsing a perfect performance or specific goal and includes all aspects of the experience, triggering sense and memory. Athletes use visualization to enhance sports performance. The technique is effective because images are almost as real to the mind as actual experience. Regularly using visualization can create confidence, direct positive behavioral change, strengthen motivation and engender feelings of control.

You may experience anxiety when trying a new relaxation technique. Know, too, that some methods can periodically bring strong emotions to the surface. You may cry or feel sad. Don't worry. This type of release is normal and can represent an important "letting go." If you have an extremely strong emotional reaction, you may want to consult with a counselor or other health care provider. ♦

GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery is a mental relaxation technique. In contrast to visualization, guided imagery is not used to rehearse any specific behavior. Rather, it is used to create a mind-body relaxation experience. Guided imagery incorporates all the senses and focuses attention inward. In this technique you listen to someone (live or on audiotape or CD) who helps guide you into imagining a comfortable place or private sanctuary. This exercise helps if you have difficulty bringing up specific images to lead you into a comfortable and relaxed experience.

To find tapes or CDs on guided imagery and meditation (or on breathing, progressive relaxation and visualization), search an online bookseller, such as amazon.com, or visit a local bookshop or music store. When doing guided imagery at home, set up a soothing setting. Dim the lights, and close the door to eliminate extraneous noise. Since body temperature usually falls when people relax, have a blanket or sweater nearby. If you enjoy fragrance, scent the air with aromatic burners or soothing essential oils like lavender to create a special feeling of relaxation.

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