



How to Relax

Many people don't know how to relax. Others may tell you "just relax" but that is easier said than done. Relaxation is a skill, actually a series of skills uniting your body, attitude and emotions. This handout explains seven separate relaxation skills and places them in a sequence that capitalizes on the strengths of each for a very effective overall experience. I suggest you read it over first, then read it aloud, then actually let your body respond as you proceed through it the third time. Your ability to relax will quicken and be more effective if you can then teach this process to someone else. This further sharpens and strengthens your skills.

7 STEPS

1. SURROUNDINGS/environment should be conducive to relaxation. Turn the lights down or off, turn off stereos and phones. However, if you have previously used soft, gentle music (instrumental is best) include this now. Find one room where you can consistently practice relaxing and one particular chair or couch. You may use the floor or bed if you are using this technique to aid sleep. You are beginning to "get in the mood" to relax.

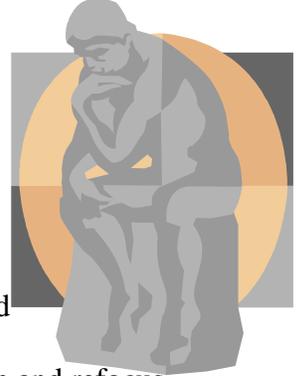
2. BODY posture is adjusted as if you were to hold yourself perfectly still for 10 minutes and right now was your last chance to move. In a chair it is often best to keep your legs uncrossed, arms at your sides (preferably off the arms of your chair so that your shoulders are fully relaxed) and eyes closed or fixed on one particular spot slightly above eye level. Next, mentally scan your body from head to toe for any muscle tension or uneasiness. If you become aware of any tension move that muscle group and let gravity do the rest, now feeling more relaxed and at ease.



3. BREATHING is slow, full, deep yet effortless. Try to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe in, start from the lower portion of your lungs (your "stomach") then up into your chest, all the way up into your shoulders, and raise your shoulders slightly. Exhale through your mouth letting your shoulders down, chest relaxing and "stomach" emptying (tightening). As you breathe, begin to notice that as you inhale you have a

sensation of coolness and as you exhale you sense warmth and a release of tension and stress. While inhaling mentally state "cool and cleaning", and when exhaling state "warm stress leaving." Now add to your increasing self-awareness the quiet peace between your exhalation and your next breath in. Spend 3-5 minutes relaxing your body and breathing in this way.

4. THOUGHTS need to be in line with your increasing sense of relaxation. Therefore give yourself permission to relax. Repeat to yourself "there is no place I have to go now, nothing I need to do except fully experience the sense of peace and relaxation I am fully entitled to." Sometimes unwanted or tension inducing thoughts may come into your awareness "I can't, I should, I shouldn't, or this is stupid, or not working." If they do close your eyes if you haven't already and imagine these worries are written on a chalkboard across the back of our eyelids. As they appear just wipe them away as you would clean a blackboard of old, outdated or no longer needed information. If they persist, vague yet partially visible on your mental blackboard, then clean them off with a damp cloth and refocus your attention on the increasing feeling of total relaxation with every cycle of breathing in then out. With each exhale allow and feel our muscles relaxing down more and more comfortably. Gradually gaining more and more control over your body and your increasing ability to relax. Your attention is becoming focused more and more on the sound and temperature of our breathing and the increased feeling of total relaxation and comfort.



5. MUSCLES are focused on once more with either of two approaches. If you are an "active" person begin tensing then relaxing each muscle group in your body. Begin by tensing and releasing the muscles in your forehead (frowning). Now clench and unclench your teeth. Next, slowly ensure your neck, then add your shoulders, raise your arms and tense your biceps finally clenching your fists. Now unclench and relax your fists, relax and lower your arms, now relaxing your shoulders and finally you're unclenching your teeth and let the frown (or squint) fade away replaced by a nice smile. Now tighten your stomach, and your rear end, your thighs, now calves and curl up your toes to tighten the muscles in your feet. Very good, now release the tension in your feet, calves, thighs, rear end, and stomach. Take a full deep breath in and out relaxing your whole body. Now you can put it all together and start with either your feet or your forehead and tighten in-sequence all your muscles as if you were pulling a string tight that connected your feet through your spine to the top of your head. Start tensing after you exhale so you can slowly inhale as you gradually tense one muscle after another. Now as you release the tension also slowly exhale. You will feel more relaxed, muscles (your whole body) resting comfortably continuing to take slow, full breaths. As you went through your body you may have noticed that a particular muscle group tends to hold tension for you. Often you will notice this same muscle group is the one that now feels tingly or even slightly uncomfortable. This may mean this area has been holding stress feelings for so long normal is tense or tight. With your increased self-control over your body and greater ability to tense and relax each muscle group individually, now allow that area some additional time, tensing and relaxing, breathing in then out. If you are a more "easy going" person or have a painful condition in your body then you can also focus on each muscle group, but without the tension skills described above. It may be more helpful for you to gradually gain increased self/muscle control by "allowing" each muscle to "relax more and more deeply." Imagine, for instance you are in a warm bubble bath (better yet go get in one) and feel each muscle group

from your forehead to your feet slowly uncoiling, relaxing more and more in the warm gentle water. Continue to breath slowly and fully, relaxing and unwinding more and more.



6. IMAGERY is often a very helpful next step and I gave you an example by imagining you were in a warm bath in the section above. The key or skill necessary here is to use all of your senses in the scene or picture you choose. For the active person you may see yourself on a hike climbing higher and higher, with problems and anxieties falling far behind you. On your climb you are rising above the problems of every day, gaining a broader perspective on them, or truly allowing them to fall behind while you focus ahead. You can feel the increasing power in your legs and the excitement of your climb. You can smell the pine trees, see the soft clouds in the beautiful blue sky, taste the perspiration as you taste the growing sense of freedom with every step, hear the sound of the triumphant eagles cry! Let yourself more and more fully actually be there. Use any scene or actual experience that helps you feel more relaxed, at peace and unrushed. The easy-going relaxer can see themselves drifting quietly and slowly on a raft in the jade/blue lagoon of their own beautiful, private, tropical island. You can hear the light breeze rustle the palm trees, smell the salt air, taste your favorite tropical drink, and feel the gentle swaying of your raft slowly rocking you to a deeper and deeper sense of relaxation and feel the warm sun slowly melting away muscle tension as if each area was a knotted rope slowly uncoiling relaxed and free. Again, use any imaginary scene or actual experience so you can fully participate and use all of your senses to gain the most satisfying relaxation experience. This is an extremely powerful and effective skill for many people; however, some of you may not be strong visualizers. Evan so, you may find one of your senses can help you more fully experience the scene you are focusing on, like the smell of pine trees during your favorite childhood family vacation.

7. AFFIRMATIONS



and positive suggestions are critical next steps but are often neglected. Before you stop your relaxation session and race off to the rat race give yourself feedback like the following: "When I open my eyes I will feel refreshed, alert, with increased confidence and energy." "I can and will continue to take time for myself and increase my control over my own body and my life." Affirmations, supportive self-statements like these are a crucial skill in and of themselves, but are a wonderful icing-on-the-cake to a fully satisfying and beneficial relaxation experience. Even if you have just been "going along with this nonsense" it is good practice to daily focus on your strengths, skills, and assets. This step is so extremely helpful and powerful because it often enables you to take charge of your internal software and delete old negative messages programmed in by others' words and treatment of you. For example, when we are young the record button is on all the time and is filtered through a very self-centered lens. If Dad comes home with something in his pocket "it must be for me" if mom and dad are arguing children will often assume it is because of them. Worse, some people were told as children bad events were their fault. As teenagers, the record button is off and on, but

what is picked up (learned) is filtered and distorted by the experiences from childhood. As adults we need to stop running on automatic and delete the old and input the new. Yes people may have broken your trust or hurt your feelings in the past, you coped and your personality was formed in particular ways but perhaps it's time to see people and situations as they are now not automatically reacting to how things were. Start now by taking consistent time out for yourself. You do deserve to feel better, you can learn the skills to feel better, and you don't have to wait for the cause of your stress to stop before you can feel better and get in control of your reactions to your stress. This entire routine, steps one through seven can be done in less than 15 minutes. You do deserve it, you can benefit from it, and you get more and more successful. Do you perform routine maintenance on your car or wait till the oil light comes on or smoke pours out from under the hood? Aren't you more important than your car?

Yes you are!

Additional skills can be found in these outstanding workbooks at your local bookstore or online at www.amazon.com:

1. Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis, New Harbinger Publications
2. The Complete Idiots Guide to Managing Stress by Jeff Davidson, 1996 Edition, Alpha Books
3. Anxiety and Phobia Workbook by Bourne and Bourne, 1995 Edition, New Harbinger Publications

"Take Charge of Your Life"