

Relaxation Tips



Equal Breathing

How it's done: Balance can do a body good, beginning with the breath. To start, inhale for a count of four, then exhale for a count of four (all through the nose, which adds a natural resistance to the breath).

When it works best: Anytime, anyplace – but this is one technique that's especially effective before bed. Similar to counting sheep, if you're [having trouble falling asleep](#), this breath can help take your mind off the racing thoughts, or whatever might be distracting you.

Abdominal Breathing Technique

How it's done: With one hand on the chest and the other on the belly, take a deep breath in through the nose, ensuring the diaphragm (not the chest) inflates with enough air to create a stretch in the lungs. The goal: 6-10 deep, slow breaths per minute for 10 minutes each day to experience immediate reductions to heart rate and blood pressure.

When it works best: Before an exam or any stressful event.

Alternate Nostril Breathing

How it's done: Starting in a comfortable meditative pose, hold the right thumb over the right nostril and inhale deeply through the left nostril. At the peak of inhalation, close off the left nostril with the ring finger, then exhale through the right nostril. Continue the pattern, inhaling through the right nostril, closing it off with the right thumb, and exhaling through the left nostril.

When it works best: Crunch time, or whenever it's time to focus or energize.

Massage

You're probably already aware how much a professional massage at a spa or health club can help reduce stress, relieve pain, and ease muscle tension. What you may not be aware of is that you can experience many of the same benefits at home or work by practicing self-massage. Try taking a few minutes to massage yourself at your desk between tasks, on the couch at the end of a hectic day, or in bed to help you unwind before sleep.

5-Minute Massage to Relieve Stress

- Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides.
- Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples.

- Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

Guided Visualization

How it's done: Head straight for your happy place, no questions asked. With a coach, therapist, or helpful recording as your guide, breathe deeply while focusing on pleasant, positive images to replace any negative thoughts.

When it works best: Pretty much any place you can safely close your eyes and let go (e.g. not at the wheel of a car).

Close your eyes and imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Just “looking” at it like you would a photograph is not enough. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible.

For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- **See** the sun setting over the water
- **Hear** the birds singing
- **Smell** the pine trees
- **Feel** the cool water on your bare feet
- **Taste** the fresh, clean air

Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a visualization session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of heaviness in your limbs, muscle twitches, or yawning. Again, these are normal responses.

Body Scan Meditation

This is a type of meditation that focuses your attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, you start with your feet and work your way up. But instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels, without labeling the sensations as either “good” or “bad”.

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing for about two minutes until you start to feel relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then slowly open your eyes and stretch, if necessary.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation is a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body. As your body relaxes, so will your mind. Start at your feet and work your way up to your face, trying to only tense those muscles intended.

- Loosen clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to breathe in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and how your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- Shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the different muscle groups.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

1. Right foot, then left foot
2. Right calf, then left calf
3. Right thigh, then left thigh
4. Hips and buttocks
5. Stomach
6. Chest
7. Back
8. Right arm and hand, then left arm and hand
9. Neck and shoulders
10. Face

Search online and on YouTube for free mindfulness meditation, body scan, audio relaxation tracks, meditations, Yoga sessions, and music to help prepare for sleep.