

Techniques to Relax and Reduce Stress

To some extent, feeling stressed is a natural and healthy response to life's events and challenges. The ability to react under stress is crucial for human survival. However, prolonged stress can have adverse effects on your health and general well-being. Learning to reduce the amount of stress that you experience can improve your outlook and help you respond to new situations more positively.

Try these techniques to help you relax and reduce stress:

Deep Breathing

Deep breathing is an exercise that can be used to quickly relieve stress and tension by promoting an efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs. When we breathe from our chests or shoulders, we can create more tension and stress by preventing air from reaching the bottom of our lungs, increasing blood pressure and preparing the body for action. Deep breathing focuses on using the diaphragm (the spot just under your rib cage) to draw slow, deep breaths into the lungs.

To practise deep breathing, try the following steps:

1. Begin by lying down, making sure that you are comfortable and that your posture is good. You can place a small pillow under the small of your back if necessary.
2. Inhale slowly through your nostrils while counting to four. Concentrate on using your abdominal muscles to draw in the air.
3. Exhale slowly and evenly through your mouth while counting to four.
4. Repeat this process for as long as it takes to relieve the tension in your body.

Once you have mastered deep breathing, try practising it while sitting or standing. Eventually, you will be able to use deep breathing throughout the day with minimal effort.

Bear the following tips in mind when using the deep breathing technique:

- Keep your chest and shoulders relatively still, and focus on using your abdomen.
- Concentrate on thinking peaceful, calming thoughts.
- Wear loose, comfortable clothes if possible.
- Take your time; two minutes a day can make a world of difference to your stress levels.

This technique not only relieves stress, it helps with concentration and energy levels, relaxation and mood improvement.

Stretching and Yoga

When we experience stress, we usually will notice tension in our necks, shoulders and head. This area is commonly referred to as the stress triangle. These can help alleviate tension, increase your body's flexibility, and create an overall calming effect. Yoga is a more formal method of stretching and may require extra time and space. However, there are many stretching exercises that you can perform throughout the day while waiting in a queue or sitting at your desk.

Try the following stretches to help relieve the tension associated with stress:

- **Shoulder shrug:** While sitting or standing, raise your shoulders up toward your ears until you feel a stretch in your back. Hold the stretch for a few seconds, and then slowly lower your shoulders. Repeat this stretch as many times as necessary throughout the day.
- **Arm stretch:** Interlace your fingers, and then slowly raise your arms above your head, with your palms facing upwards. Push up as far as you can, and hold for 10 seconds. Lower your arms and repeat.
- **Neck roll:** Relax your shoulders and let your head roll forward until your chin is resting on your chest. Slowly rotate your head in a gentle circle, making sure you avoid straining your neck. Repeat this exercise, and then perform it in the opposite direction.
- **Full body stretch:** While standing, reach up towards the ceiling, stretching all of your muscles at the same time.

Massage

Massage offers a number of physical and mental benefits. Physically, massage can help alleviate tense muscles, lower blood pressure, promote deep breathing and improve posture. Some of the mental benefits of massage include reduced anxiety, increased body awareness and enhanced creativity. Massage can also help to satisfy the basic human need for touch.

Many beauty salons or health spas offer massages as part of their services. Ask at your local salon for the types of massages that are available. You may also want to talk to your doctor to discuss therapeutic massage.

Massage does not always have to be an expensive stress-reducing option. You can use self-massage any time you feel stressed at home or at work.

Meditation and Visualisation

Meditation involves “quieting the mind” by blocking out sensory input and distraction, while visualisation involves using the brain’s creative capacity to create a stress-free experience, much like daydreaming. Both meditation and visualisation can be helpful in relieving stress and neither requires any formal training.

By sitting in a comfortable, quiet environment, closing your eyes and freeing your mind from its many concerns even just for a few minutes each day, you can learn to relax quickly. Try concentrating on an image that symbolises your stress, such as a giant ball that slowly begins to shrink; alternatively, let your mind go blank.

When practicing meditation or visualisation, do not fight stressful thoughts. Resisting these thoughts is like telling yourself not to think of the colour red. Instead, think of these thoughts as floating in one ear and out of the other, and being replaced in your mind by calmer images.

Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle-relaxation techniques involve systematically tensing, relaxing and visualising each major muscle group. It is best to practise these techniques when you have about 20 minutes and can find a quiet place where you can lie down without being disturbed. You might want to play some soft music or relaxation tapes while practising this technique.

To practise muscle relaxation, do the following:

1. Lie down in a quiet, comfortable area. Close your eyes and take in slow, deep breaths.
2. Starting at your feet, contract and relax the muscles of your body. Start by moving up your body to the top of your head, and then reverse direction back down to your feet.
3. Finally, relax your hand and visualise the tension escaping from your body.
4. When you have finished, spend a few moments enjoying the feeling of a tension-free body. Continue taking slow, deep breaths until you are ready to resume your day.

You can do a mini version of this exercise at stress-filled times throughout the day if you begin to feel tension in your muscles.

Calming Thoughts

Our thought patterns often cause or contribute to the stress that we are feeling. Learning to listen to your inner voice is the first step in recognising negative thought patterns. If you are experiencing high levels of stress, chances are that your thought patterns include a sense that you are not in control.

The next time you encounter a stressful situation, take a moment to tune into your thoughts and feelings. Write these thoughts down and then replace them with something more positive. If you need to, you can always revisit the list of thoughts when you anticipate being in a stressful situation.

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