



Stress relaxation techniques

Reflection guide

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Overview

- You will learn to manage and prevent stress through relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, visualization, and progressive muscle relaxation.

Key takeaways



Main points:



Learning insights:



What areas do I need to improve on?



My action plan:

Job aids

Relaxation techniques

The link between stress and poor health is well known. It is estimated that 30-60% of visits to physicians' offices result from stress-related complaints. Although we know we need to take time for recreation and relaxation, when we are busy and stressed these are the very things we tend to cut out of our lives. The relaxation techniques provided below are easy to use, quick and effective. Their benefits include better mental and physical health, greater internal peace and an improved quality of life. Their only cost to you is the time it takes to do them. Our ability to relax improves with practice. If, at first, you feel like you are not achieving a state of deep relaxation with the following exercises, you are encouraged to repeat them a few more times to give yourself a chance to master these new skills.

Deep breathing meditation

Deep breathing is one of the easiest relaxation techniques to learn, and it can be done in just about any place and at any time and there are huge associated benefits with deep breathing, in addition to the overall relaxation effects. Other benefits include: lowered heart and respiration rate, lowered blood pressure, and an increase in energy level. Deep breathing counteracts the fight or flight response that comes with stress and can help to reduce general anxiety.

Exercise time: 5 – 10 minutes

1. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath.
2. Breathe deeply, in through your nose to the count of 1, 2, 3 and out through your mouth to the count of 4, 5, 6.
3. Acknowledge any thoughts that drift into your mind, and then bring your attention back to your breath, breathing in and out very slowly.
4. As you breathe in, imagine that you are bringing energy into your body, and as you breathe out, imagine that you are releasing tension and worry.
5. Continue this deep breathing process for 5 – 10 minutes.
6. When you are ready, take whatever time you need now to slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings.

Guided visualization

Visualization is something people do every day. We use mental images as we wake up and think about what we have to do today; many people actually ‘picture’ the things that need to be accomplished. Another example is the daydreaming that we all do from time to time; some days we daydream more than others! Guided imagery takes this process of visualization one step further by guiding the images toward a specific goal, which could be relaxation, healing, exploring options in a specific situation, or to manage stress. In a work situation, someone might use visualization to plan strategies for accomplishing certain tasks. Athletes use visualization to increase their performance level; cancer patients use imagery to heighten their immune response. The guided visualization exercise below focuses on increasing relaxation.

Exercise time: 10 – 15 minutes

Here is your script for the visualization, which is intended to take 10 minutes to complete:

“In your mind, walk slowly to a quiet place...Your place can be indoors or outside...It needs to be peaceful and safe...Picture yourself unloading your worries, your anxieties...Notice the view from your special place...What do you see? What can you hear? What do you smell? Notice what is just in front of you...Reach out and touch it...How does it feel? Smell it...Hear it... Make the temperature comfortable...Be safe here...Look around for a private spot, a special spot...Find your way to this place.

You have arrived at your special place...What is under your feet? How does it feel? What do you see around you? What do you hear? Look out as far as you can see... What do you see? Sit or lie in your special place...Notice its smells, sights, sounds...This is your place, and nothing can harm you here...Let yourself relax...You are safe and comfortable...If you like, say an affirmation like “I can relax here” or “I can come here when I wish” ...Spend a few minutes appreciating your relaxation and the pleasant sensations it brings you. Memorize this place. You can return and relax here whenever you want...Say “goodbye” for now and leave by the way you came. Turn back and look at your special place again. Notice its smells, sights, and sounds.... Remind yourself you can return to this special place you create whenever you wish... Gently open your eyes and return to the room.”

Progressive relaxation exercise

The progressive relaxation exercise allows the relaxation of muscles through a two-step process. First you deliberately squeeze and apply tension to a specific muscle and then you suddenly stop the tension and let go, paying attention to how the muscle relaxes as the tension flows away. Through practice you will learn to recognize how it feels when your muscles are full of tension, and how it feels when they are relaxed. Over time this will allow you to quickly recognize tension anywhere in your body, and to deliberately release it, in any situation, thus reducing any associated anxiety.

Exercise time: 10 – 15 minutes

Be careful not to tense your muscles to a point of feeling pain. Squeeze gently but deliberately.

1. Close your eyes and bring your attention to your breath.
2. Breathe deeply, in through your nose to the count of 1, 2, 3 and out through your mouth to the count of 4, 5, 6.
3. Acknowledge any thoughts that drift into your mind, and then bring your attention back to your breath, breathing in and out very slowly.
4. Now, focus your mind on the muscles of your right foot; then inhale and tense the muscles in your right foot and hold for a count of five 1,2,3,4,5. After the five seconds, just quickly and suddenly let go. Let all the tightness flow out of the muscles as you simultaneously exhale. Feel the muscles relax and become loose and limp. As you do this, let go of any tension, worry and anxious thoughts you have.
5. Follow this same procedure with all the remaining muscle groups in your body, in the following sequence: your right lower leg and foot, your entire right leg, your left foot, your lower left leg and foot, your entire left leg. For each muscle, remember to hold to a count of five and then suddenly just release and let all the tension flow away. Continue moving up your body in the following suggested order: right hand, right forearm and hand, entire right arm, left hand, left forearm and hand, entire left arm, abdomen, chest, neck, shoulders, and face. Hold the muscle for five seconds, then release. Take your time. Slowly tighten the muscles and gently relax them as you breathe in and out.
6. When you have completed all the muscle groups, take whatever time you need to slowly bring your attention back to your surroundings.

Additional resources

Helpful resources for relaxation

- Richard Carlson. Don't Sweat the Small Stuff. Hyperion, N.Y. 1997 ISBN 0-7868-8185-2
- Larry Blumenfeld. The Big Book of Relaxation. The Relaxation Company, N.Y. 1994 ISBN: 1-55961-282-7
- Martha Davis et al. The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook. New Harbinger Publication, CA. 1995 ISBN: 1-879237-82-2