

UCSF Center for Reproductive Health

Support Services

Instructions for Mindful Relaxation Exercises

General Notes

Mindful relaxation exercises should be done at least once a day to begin with. Initially, do the exercises in a quiet room, free from interruption, so that you can give your entire concentration to the relaxation exercise.

Select a comfortable place to do it. That could be either a comfortable chair, sitting on cushions, or lying down (unless you think you might fall asleep. Sleep is not the same as relaxation!). If you want to do some method to help go to sleep, you could do it in your bed, but make sure you complete the exercise before you fall asleep, otherwise you will not learn it. As you master the relaxation exercises, you can try to use the skills in various postures and situations.

When you are ready to begin, decide which form of relaxation you will use, arrange your seating appropriately, finish all you need to do, then start the exercises. It is important that you have nothing external to deal with while you are relaxing. For example, if you are expecting a phone call, turn your phone off; don't start cooking before relaxing if something might boil over; don't begin exercises right before you are expecting a visitor. That way, when you are relaxing, you can be comfortably aware that any distractions that occur are not important and don't require your attention.

After you have finished the relaxation, don't jump up right away. You might feel momentarily dizzy or get straight back into the old habit of tensing. Instead, bring your attention gently to your surroundings and get up slowly, trying to preserve the state of relaxation for as long as possible. Set about your activities in a slow and peaceful manner.

Remember, relaxation is a skill—it improves with frequent and regular practice. Do not be concerned if you do not reach deep levels of relaxation during your early sessions. The more frequently you practice mindfulness and relaxation skills, the deeper the relaxation will be, and the longer-lasting the effects.

You will need to commit yourself to at least eight weeks of daily practice in order to achieve really long-lasting effects. Naturally, longer is even better. Some people continue daily relaxation many years after leaving treatment. If you can do this, we recommend it. However, not all people continue relaxation in this way. Typically, the people who benefit the most from relaxation skills either practice regularly and/or practice immediately when they notice any increase in tension or anxiety.

Difficulties with Relaxation

Some people report that they cannot relax or that they cannot bring themselves to practice relaxation. Since all human beings share a similar biological make-up, there is usually no purely physical reason why relaxation should work for some people and not others. The reason that relaxation may not work for some people is usually due to some psychological factor or insufficient practice.

I am too tense to relax

In this case, the individual uses the very symptom that needs treating as an excuse for not relaxing. Relaxation may take longer than expected, but there is no reason why someone should have to remain tense.

I don't like the feelings of relaxation

About 1 in 10 people report that, when they relax, they come into contact with feelings that they don't like or feelings that frighten them. These feelings indicate that you are coming into contact with your body again and noticing sensations that may have been kept under check for many years. You do not have to worry about losing control during relaxation sessions. You can always let a little tension back in until you get used to the sensations.

I feel guilty wasting so much time

Relaxation is an important part of reducing the experience of stress. And like learning any new skill, learning the skills to do this takes time. Finally, remember, you do not have to be openly productive to be doing something useful.

I can't find the place or time

Be adaptive. If you can't find 20 minutes, find 10 minutes somewhere in the day to relax. If you do not have a private room at work, go to a park. Relax during the evening, while your partner is reading the paper - you do not have to be alone to relax. Don't choose a time when you would rather be elsewhere. For example, don't choose to relax at lunchtime if you would prefer to be with friends.

I'm not getting anything out of this

Unfortunately, many people expect too much too soon from relaxation training. You cannot expect to undo years of habitual tensing in a few relaxation sessions. Impatience is one of the symptoms of anxiety, so you need to understand that this reaction is a sign that you actually need to continue with relaxation training. Give the training time to take effect. Set long-term goals, rather than monitor your improvement day-by-day.

I haven't got the self-control

You need to realize that quick, easy cures for long-standing tension that call for no effort from you do not exist. The longest-lasting treatment effects occur when an individual takes responsibility for his or her recovery and commits to daily practice of a relaxation strategy.

The Three Part Breath

Adapted from The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook

Purpose:

- Focuses the attention on the present moment.
- Calms and grounds the mind.

Instructions:

This is often done while seated in a comfortable, cross-legged position, but it is also nice to do while lying on the back, particularly at the beginning of your practice. When you are lying down, you can really feel the breath moving through your body as it makes contact with the floor.

1. Sit comfortably or lie down on the back with the eyes closed, relaxing the face and the body.
2. Observe the natural inhalation and exhalation of your breath without changing anything. If you find yourself distracted by the activity in your mind, try not to engage in the thoughts. Just notice them and then let them go, bringing your attention back to your breathing.
3. Then begin to inhale deeply through the nose.
4. On each inhale, fill the belly up with your breath. Expand the belly with air like a balloon.
5. On each exhale, expel all the air out from the belly through your nose. Draw the navel back towards your spine to make sure that the belly is empty of air.
6. Repeat this deep belly breathing for about five breaths.
7. On the next inhale, fill the belly up with air as described above. Then when the belly is full, draw in a little more breath and let that air expand into the rib cage causing the ribs to widen apart.
8. On the exhale, let the air go first from the rib cage, letting the ribs slide closer together, and then from the belly, drawing the navel back towards the spine.
9. Repeat this deep breathing into the belly and rib cage for about five breaths.
10. On the next inhale, fill the belly and rib cage up with air as described above. Then draw in just a little more air and let it fill the upper chest, all the way up to the collarbone, causing the area around the heart (which is called the heart center in yoga), expand and rise.
11. On the exhale, let the breath go first from the upper chest, allowing the heart center sink back down, then from the rib cage, letting the ribs slide closer together. Finally, let the air go from the belly, drawing the navel back towards the spine.
12. You are practicing three-part breath! Continue at your own pace, eventually coming to let the three parts of the breath happen smoothly without pausing. Continue for at least ten minutes.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Purpose:

- Identify areas of tension in the body
- Distinguish between tense and relaxed muscles
- Reduces physiological tension—moves body to a state that is incompatible with anxiety

Instructions:

Recommended time: 12-15 min, twice a day.

Practice is to be done while lying down or seated in a chair with both feet on the floor. Each muscle group is tensed for 5-10 seconds and then released for 15-20 seconds (these are just rules of thumb; you can adjust the durations). When you release, let the tension go all at once. Notice the contrast between the muscles in their tensed vs. relaxed state. This procedure is repeated at least once. If a particular muscle is difficult to relax, you can repeat that part of the exercise.

Get into a comfortable position in a quiet room where you won't be disturbed. You may want to loosen your clothing and remove your shoes. Begin to relax as you take a few slow, deep breaths.

Forehead. Wrinkle up your forehead by arching your eyebrows and creasing your forehead; hold the tension, then relax.

Eyes. Squeeze your eyes together tightly; hold the tension, then relax.

Face. Put a forced smile on your face and spread your face; hold the tension, then relax.

Tongue. Push your tongue against the roof of your mouth; hold the tension, then relax.

Jaws. Clench your jaws together tightly; hold the tension; then relax.

Lips. Pucker up your lips and push them out as far as you can; hold the tension, then relax.

Neck. Tighten the muscles of your neck by pulling your chin in and shrugging up your shoulders; hold the tension, then relax.

Right Arm. Tense your right arm and hand by stretching it out in front of you and clenching your fist tightly; hold the tension, then relax.

Left Arm. Tense your left arm and hand by stretching it out in front of you and clenching your fist tightly; hold the tension, then relax.

Right Leg. Extend your right leg in front of you (at the height of the chair seat), tense your thigh and leg by pointing your toes inward toward your face; hold the tension, then relax.

Left Leg. Extend your left leg in front of you (at the height of the chair seat), tense your thigh and leg by pointing your toes inward toward your face; hold the tension, then relax.

Upper Back. Tense your back muscles by sitting slightly forward in the chair, bending your elbows and trying to get them to touch each other behind your back; hold the tension, then relax.

Chest. Tense your chest muscles by pulling your stomach in and thrusting your chest upward and outward; hold the tension, then relax.

Stomach. Tense your stomach muscles, making them hard by pushing your stomach out; hold the tension, then relax.

Buttocks and Thighs. Tense your buttocks and thighs by placing your feet squarely on the floor, pointing your toes into the floor, and forcing your heels to remain on the floor while pushing forward; hold the tension, then relax.

Walking Meditation

Purpose:

- To increase sensory awareness of the environment.
- To discover bodily sensations resulting from movement.
- To expand emotional clarity and mental concentration.
- To calm the body and the mind.

Instructions:

Recommended time: 15-20 min

Begin by standing up and taking a couple of deep cleansing breaths while bringing your focus and your attention into the present moment. When you are ready to start on your meditative walk, begin by walking at a pace that feels comfortable for you.

And as you walk, feel your feet as they connect with the ground under you. Isolate the sensation in your heels, your toes, and your ankles. Become aware of the movement of your hips and the swinging of your arms. Not trying to change the way you walk, simply noticing what is taking place. Taking the time to notice and appreciate the ability of your body to propel you forward.

And as you continue to walk, noticing the environment around you with all of your senses. Feeling the air as it touches your skin. Noticing the quality of light around you. Seeing clearly the colors that appear before you (colors of vibrant flowers, lush trees, architecturally interesting buildings). Listen carefully to the sounds that surround you (birds chirping, leaves rustling, voices speaking, traffic moving). Observing the outer world as you would a painting, with heightened interest and awareness. And allowing yourself to stop and touch the bark of a tree or to smell an herb or a flower if you wish.

If it feels right for you, alternating between focusing on your environment and focusing on your bodily sensations. Finding a cycle that feels comfortable for you. Perhaps spending a few minutes on each aspect of your walking meditation and then switching.

And when your walking meditation comes to an end, taking a few minutes to sit quietly, closing your eyes and noticing how you are feeling both emotionally and physically after your walking meditation has ended.

Short Exercises

Adapted from The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook

Use the following exercises to enhance relaxation and release tension. These are brief exercises you can do almost anytime, anywhere.

Breath Counting

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position with legs and arms uncrossed and your spine straight.
2. Breathe in deeply into your abdomen. Let yourself pause before you exhale.
3. As you exhale, count “one” to yourself. As you continue to inhale and exhale, count each exhalation: “Two... three... four...”
4. Continue counting your exhalations in sets of four for five to ten minutes.
5. Notice your breathing gradually slowing, your body relaxing, and your mind calming as you practice this breathing meditation.

The Relaxing Sigh

During the day, you probably catch yourself signing or yawning. This is generally a sign that you are not getting enough oxygen. Signing and yawning are your body’s way of remedying the situation. A sign is often accompanied by a sense that things are not quite as they should be, and a feeling of tension. Since a sign actually does release a bit of this tension, you can practice signing at will as a means of relaxing.

1. Sit or stand up straight.
2. Sign deeply, letting out a sound of deep relief as the air rushes out of your lungs.
3. Don’t think about inhaling—just let the air come in naturally.
4. Take eight to twelve of these relaxing signs and let yourself experience the feeling of relaxation. Repeat whenever you feel the need for it.

Letting Go of Tension

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet on the floor.
2. Breathe in deeply into your abdomen and say to yourself, “Breathe in relaxation.” Let yourself pause before you exhale.
3. Breathe out from your abdomen and say to yourself, “Breathe out tension.” Pause before your inhale.
4. Use each inhalation as a moment to become aware of any tension in your body.
5. Use each exhalation as an opportunity to let go of tension.

6. You may find it helpful to use your imagination to picture or feel the relaxation entering and the tension leaving your body.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation – Shorthand Procedure

In this procedure, whole muscle groups are simultaneously tensed and then relaxed. Repeat each procedure at least once, tensing each muscle group from five to seven seconds and then relaxing from fifteen to thirty seconds. Remember to notice the contrast between the sensations of tension and relaxation.

1. Curl both fists, tightening biceps and forearms. Hold. Relax.
2. Roll your head around on your neck clockwise in a complete circle, then reverse. Hold. Relax.
3. Wrinkle up the muscles of your face like a walnut: forehead wrinkled, eyes squinted, mouth opened, and shoulders hunched. Hold. Relax.
4. Arch your shoulders back as you take a deep breath into your chest. Hold. Relax. Take a deep breath, pushing out your stomach. Hold. Relax.
5. Straighten your legs and point your toes back toward your face, tightening your shins. Hold. Relax.
6. Straighten your legs and curl your toes, simultaneously tightening your calves, thighs, and buttocks. Relax.