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# Quick Relaxation Techniques

**F**rom the minute you wake in the morning until the time you lay your head down at night, the hustle of life can rev up your system. Challenges at work or home can set off alarms in your body's stress response system many times a day. But there's good news: quick relaxation techniques can help you turn off the stress response. In these pages, you will find seven ways to relax without having to take a lot of time out of your day.

## Why Quick Relaxations?

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If you're seeking the mental, emotional and physical benefits of relaxation, you need to practice it often. Finding time to practice is an obstacle for many people. While you may not be able to imagine carving out 20 to 40 minutes a day for quiet meditation, odds are good that you can find one minute, or five minutes, or maybe even ten minutes at least once a day. That's the time you'll need to use quick relaxation techniques.

*Quick relaxation will be most effective if you can:*

- Find a quiet place.
- Sit or lie down in a comfortable position.
- Loosen any tight clothing.
- Close your eyes. (If you wear contact lenses, remove them first if it hurts to close your eyes over them.)

Even if you can't do all of these things every time, you can still relax. Your relaxation just may not be quite as deep as it would have been otherwise.

Below are seven different techniques. Try each one, and see which of them work best for you.

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# Releasing Muscle Tension

This technique is especially helpful when you are physically tense. It is a quick version of progressive muscular relaxation (PMR), one of the most extensively studied methods of relaxation.

Begin by closing your eyes. Focus all your attention on the muscles of your body. Start with the muscles in your feet and work your way up, area by area. As you focus on each area, check for tension and let it go. If you have time, it helps to tense each area and then release the tension. As you do so, take deep, slow breaths.

Now, tense and release the muscles in your:

- Feet
- Ankles
- Calves
- Knees
- Thighs
- Buttocks
- Belly
- Chest
- Back
- Shoulders
- Neck
- Scalp
- Forehead
- Eyes
- Mouth and cheeks
- Upper arms
- Lower arms
- Hands

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## Shaking It Out

Close the door or take a quick look down the hall before you try this. It looks silly, but it's fast and it really works. If the silliness makes you laugh while you do it, so much the better. Laughter helps relax you, too.

Imagine that you are a dog shaking off after getting wet. Now, just like a soaked dog, shake out your:

- Arms and hands
- Legs and feet
- Head
- Shoulders

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## Breathing Deeply, Breathing Slowly

Although deep breathing is one of the simplest relaxation techniques, it remains one of the most effective.

When you take deep breaths correctly, your stomach should rise and fall. This happens for a simple reason. Beneath your rib cage is a sheet of muscle called the diaphragm. As you breathe out, the diaphragm pushes upward to press air out of your lungs. This causes your stomach to cave in. As you breathe in, your diaphragm pushes downward, making your stomach expand.

First, close your eyes and put one hand on your stomach. Then breathe out slowly and completely. You should be able to feel your stomach cave in as you breathe out. Now breathe in slowly and deeply. You should feel your stomach expand as you breathe in. Repeat this sequence for as much time as you have. You'll probably notice that your breathing naturally becomes slower, and you can "stop" between breaths, as you become more relaxed. Continue for as much time as you have available.

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## Repeating a Pleasing Word

This is a short version of a technique used in transcendental meditation. It is especially useful in driving away upsetting or intrusive thoughts.

First, choose a word that is meaningful to you or one that you find pleasing. The word can describe a feeling you wish to experience—such as joy—or a quality you hope to possess. You could choose a word that reminds you of some relaxing experience or place. Or pick one that has religious or cultural meaning for you. Or you might simply choose a pleasing sound.

Here are some examples:

- Calm
- Om
- Peace
- Relax
- One
- Love
- Ocean
- Home
- Water
- Warmth
- Sunshine
- Hmmm

Now close your eyes. Take deep, slow breaths as described in the last technique. Each time you breathe out, repeat the word you've chosen. Continue for as much time as you have available.

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# Heavy And Warm Exercises

Like several of the other techniques, this one is a shortened version of a more intensive method called autogenic training.

First, close your eyes. Then slowly say the following phrases to yourself:

- My arms are heavy and warm.
- My legs are heavy and warm.
- My solar plexus is warm. (The solar plexus is the area immediately below the ribcage.)
- My forehead is cool.
- My heartbeat is calm and regular.
- It breathes me. (The idea here is that your breathing is completely effortless, as if it were being done for you.)

As you say each phrase, try to actually *feel* it happening. Studies have confirmed that you *can* make your hands and feet warmer, your forehead cooler, and your heartbeat calmer through the power of your mind. And once these changes have taken place, you feel deeply relaxed.

Repeat each phrase three times if time permits.

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# Visualizing a Personal Paradise

This technique harnesses the power of your imagination. Choose an activity or place that you have found deeply relaxing. Then visualize yourself in the midst of it.

You might, for example, imagine that you are:

- Lying in the tall grass of a meadow with a warm sun shining down on you
- Standing by the ocean as the waves wash in and out
- Visiting your favorite vacation spot
- Walking in the cool woods
- Curled up with a book in your favorite chair
- Sitting on a porch or deck in the morning, listening to birds sing
- Sitting in a house of worship
- Listening to a chant or other relaxing sounds.

First, close your eyes. Start by taking several deep, slow breaths. Call up your image as fully as possible in your mind. What colors do you see? What sounds do you hear? What do you touch? Are there any pleasant smells or tastes? Breathe slowly and deeply as you bring this all back. Relax. Relax. Relax.

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## Stretching Yourself Out

If your muscles have tensed up, this is an excellent way to relax them. As you gradually stretch your body out, try some deep, slow breathing. It will be easiest to do these stretches standing, but some can also be done if you're sitting in a chair and it's not convenient to stand up.

- Keeping your back straight, look down at the floor to stretch your neck. Then lean your head to either side to stretch your neck sideways.
- Turn your head to look right, then left, as far as you can.
- Raise your shoulders to your ears and then let them fall.
- Stretch your arms up as high as you can, as if you are trying to touch the sky. Then bring them down to your sides.
- Bend slowly at the waist and let your arms hang in front of you.
- Stand with your feet spread apart. Raise one arm, then bend over sideways until your arm is parallel to the floor (or go as far as you can). Raise the opposite arm and repeat.
- If you can sit down on the floor, spread your legs wide apart and lean straight forward, then lean forward over each leg.
- If you can lie down on the floor on your back, bend your knees and bring them to your chest. Do this with both knees together, then separately.
- If you can lie down on the floor on your stomach with your arms by your sides, place your head to one side, then to the other. Let yourself feel the floor fully supporting you and your body sinking deeply into the floor, feeling heavier...heavier...heavier.

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# Finding The Time To Relax

Somewhere in each 24-hour day there are a handful of minutes when you could relax. Your body needs it. Your mind needs it. You deserve it. But unless you actively schedule a time, you can easily miss out on it.

Right now, think about which of the quick relaxation techniques appeal most to you. Check off one or more that you would like to use regularly:

- Releasing muscle tension
- Shaking it out
- Breathing deeply, breathing slowly
- Repeating a pleasant word
- Growing warm and heavy
- Visualizing a personal paradise
- Stretching yourself out

Now take a moment to think about when you can fit your favorite technique—or techniques--into your day. When do you usually have a few minutes to yourself? In the morning? In the afternoon? After supper? At bedtime?

What is your best time? \_\_\_\_\_

Remember, some techniques take less time than others. You can do those on days when you are especially pressed for time and save others for days that allow you more leisure.

Choosing the techniques you like and using them regularly can help you feel more relaxed much of the time. By being relaxed much of the time, you can prevent or defuse potentially stressful situations.

**Practicing relaxation often is a small investment with a big payoff!**