

Tension Tamers

We all have stress sometimes. Often stress is helpful, as it can encourage you to meet a deadline or get things done. But if stress happens too often or lasts too long, it can have negative effects. It can be linked to headaches, upset stomach, back pain, depression, and trouble sleeping. It can also weaken your immune system, making it harder to fight off disease. The good news is that you can learn ways to manage stress using specific techniques, which can also help manage any related physical symptoms you might be having.

Here is an instruction set for four different stress management/relaxation techniques. They vary in length from 5 to 30 minutes, so you can easily decide which “tension tamer” to use for any given situation. For example, in the heat of a stressful moment, you may decide a couple of quick deep breaths are the best stress management tool. After a long day at work or with kids, practicing progressive muscle relaxation may be just what you need to unwind for the day.

Deep Breathing Exercise

1. Sit in a comfortable position.
2. Take 3 deep cleansing breaths.
3. Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.
4. Try to breathe so that only your stomach rises and falls.
 - a. As you inhale, concentrate on your chest remaining relatively still while your stomach rises. It may be helpful to imagine that your pants are too big and you need to push your stomach out to hold them up.

- b. When exhaling, allow your stomach to fall in and the air to fully escape.
5. Repeat this several times, concentrating on only moving your stomach.
6. Return to regular breathing, continuing to breathe so that only your stomach moves. Try to develop on an easy, regular breathing pattern.

Note: It is normal for this healthy breathing to feel a little awkward at first. With practice, it will become more natural to you.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing, in succession, different muscle groups of the body. The idea is to tense each muscle group hard (not so hard that you strain, however) for about 10 seconds, and then to let go of it suddenly. You then give yourself 15–20 seconds to relax, noticing how the muscle group feels when relaxed in contrast to how it felt when tensed, before going on to the next group of muscles.

You might also say to yourself "I am relaxing," "Letting go," "Let the tension flow away," or any other relaxing phrase during each relaxation period between successive muscle groups. Throughout the exercise, maintain your focus on your muscles. When your attention wanders, bring it back to the particular muscle group you're working on.

Here are some guidelines to maximize the benefits:

- Make sure you are in a setting that is quiet and comfortable.
- When you tense a particular muscle group, do so vigorously without straining, for 7–10 seconds. You may want to count "one-thousand-one," "one-thousand-two," and so on, as a way of marking off seconds.
- Concentrate on the physical sensation of what is happening. Feel the buildup of tension in each particular muscle group.

- When you release the muscles, do so abruptly, and then relax, enjoying the sudden feeling of limpness. Allow the relaxation to develop for at least 15–20 seconds before going on to the next group of muscles.
- Allow all the *other* muscles in your body to remain relaxed, as far as possible, while working on a particular muscle group.
- Tense and relax each muscle group once. But if a particular area feels especially tight, you can tense and relax it two or three times, waiting about 15–20 seconds between each cycle.
- Don't hold your breath, grit your teeth, or squint! Breathe slowly and evenly and think only about the tension–relaxation contrast. Note that each step is really two steps--one cycle of tension–relaxation for each set of opposing muscles.

2. Once you are comfortable in a quiet place, follow these instructions:

1. To begin, take three deep abdominal breaths, exhaling slowly each time. As you exhale, imagine that tension throughout your body begins to flow away.
2. Clench your fists. Hold for 7–10 seconds and then release for 15–20 seconds. *Use these same time intervals for all other muscle groups.*
3. Tighten your biceps by drawing your forearms up toward your shoulders and "making a muscle" with both arms. Hold... and then relax.
4. Tighten your *triceps*--the muscles on the undersides of your upper arms--by extending your arms out straight and locking your elbows. Hold ... and then relax.
5. Tense the muscles in your forehead by raising your eyebrows as far as you can. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine your forehead muscles becoming smooth and limp as they relax.
6. Tense the muscles around your eyes by clenching your eyelids tightly shut. Hold... and then relax. Imagine sensations of deep relaxation spreading all around them.

7. Tighten your jaws by opening your mouth so widely that you stretch the muscles around the hinges of your jaw. Hold ... and then relax. Let your lips part and allow your jaw to hang loose.
8. Tighten the muscles in the back of your neck by pulling your head way back, as if you were going to touch your head to your back (be gentle with this muscle group to avoid injury). Focus only on tensing the muscles in your neck. Hold ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tight, it's good to do the tense-relax cycle twice.
9. Take a few deep breaths and tune in to the weight of your head sinking into whatever surface it is resting on.
10. Tighten your shoulders by raising them up as if you were going to touch your ears. Hold ... and then relax.
11. Tighten the muscles around your shoulder blades by pushing your shoulder blades back as if you were going to touch them together. Hold the tension in your shoulder blades ... and then relax. Since this area is often especially tense, you might repeat the tense-relax sequence twice.
12. Tighten the muscles of your chest by taking in a deep breath. Hold that breath for up to 10 seconds ... and then release slowly.
13. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold ... and then release. Imagine a wave of relaxation spreading through your abdomen.
14. Tighten your lower back by arching it up. (You should omit this exercise if you have lower back pain.) Hold ... and then relax.
15. Tighten your buttocks by pulling them together. Hold ... and then relax. Imagine the muscles in your hips going loose and limp.
16. Squeeze the muscles in your thighs all the way down to your knees. You will probably have to tighten your hips along with your thighs, since the thigh muscles attach at the pelvis. Hold ... and then relax. Feel your thigh muscles relaxing completely.
17. Tighten your calf muscles by-pulling your toes toward you (flex carefully to avoid cramps). Hold ... and then relax.

18. Tighten your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold ... and then relax.
19. Mentally scan your body for any residual tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tense-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
20. Now imagine a wave of relaxation slowly spreading throughout your body, starting at your head and gradually penetrating every muscle group all the way down to your toes.

The entire progressive muscle relaxation sequence should take you 20–30 minutes the first time. With practice you may decrease the time needed to 15–20 minutes.

Cue-controlled relaxation

1. Set up a cue to remind you to relax.

There are two different types of cues:

- a) **Symptom Cue**
- b) **Internal Cue**

The best way to do cue-controlled relaxation is to do it when ever you notice a symptom cue:

- **Physical Symptom:** tight muscles, cold hands, feeling hot, hyperventilating, etc.
- **Emotional Symptom:** feeling frustrated, irritated, annoyed, angry, etc.
- **Behavioral Symptom:** teeth clenching, heavy sighing or exhalations, yelling, cursing, etc.

Whenever you notice a symptom cue, do the cue-controlled relaxation. However, you may not always catch yourself or notice a symptom cue, especially if you are very busy or involved or focused or stressed. External cues

are an alternative. External cues work best if linked to some naturally reoccurring event such as:

- the phone rings
- save a computer file
- let the dog out
- there's a commercial on TV/Radio
- you're at a stop light
- your watch alarm sounds

You can also develop “cue prompts”, such as putting colored dots in certain places (telephone, watch, rear view mirror of car, etc.). Whenever you see the prompt, practice the exercise whether you need it or not.

Note: It's very important that once you set up a cue, you actually do the relaxation exercise when the cue comes up. Eventually it will become a healthy habit!



Relax by doing the following

- a) Take a deep breath
- b) Exhale *s / o w / y...*
- c) Say a word to yourself as you exhale (e.g., “relax” or “calm”) – Remember your cue!
- d) As an option (if it's convenient) – Close your eyes and focus on letting your muscles relax

The CALM Reminder

Chest: Breathing slower and deeper

Arms: Shoulders sag

Legs: Loose and flexible

Mouth: Jaw drop