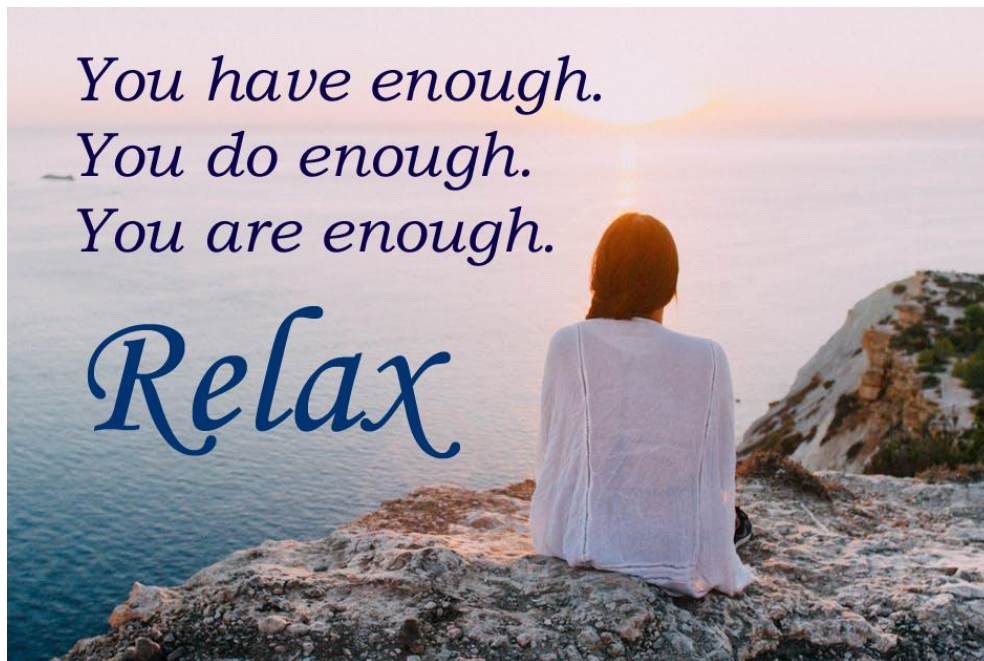


Relaxation Techniques to Improve Health and Wellbeing

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5 June 2019



Knowing how to relax is vital for your health and well-being. It is essential for dealing with stress and anxiety. Effective relaxation techniques are important if you want to be happy and have healthy relationships with colleagues, friends and family.

Understanding stress

Stress has been labelled the “Health epidemic of the 21st Century”. Medicare found the majority of Australians feel stressed and the figures have been rising.¹ Treating stress involves understanding its cause and developing strategies to deal with its effects and prevention.

Do you:

- experience headaches, neck aches, back aches, and general soreness?
- have trouble getting enough sleep?
- constantly think about work or a never-ending task list?
- find that you “need” that beer or glass of wine at the end of the day?
- struggle to eat a healthy diet – eating either too much or too little?
- find yourself regularly eating comfort foods (e.g. chocolate) and/or fast foods?
- feel like you are stuck on a merry-go-round of life that isn’t going anywhere?
- have difficulty remembering the last time you laughed?
- easily become irritated or short-tempered?

¹ <https://www.medibank.com.au/livebetter/health-brief/health-insights/was-2017-australias-most-stressful-year/>

If any of these stress indicators apply to you, or someone you know, the relaxation techniques described below may help.

Relaxation techniques are effective for treating the symptoms of stress and in helping prevent the onset of stress. If stress continues to be a problem, causing a decline in health and/or relationships, seek professional help.

Stress is a natural part of our lives. Small amounts of stress can be helpful, providing motivation and even excitement. Too much stress, though, can overwhelm the body's internal systems, resulting in pain and illness. The classic stress response involves three phases:²

1. **The alarm reaction.** The sympathetic nervous system is activated and the adrenal gland releases hormones including cortisol, adrenaline (epinephrine), and norepinephrine. Energy levels, muscle tension and blood pressure all increase.
2. **The stage of resistance.** The body continues to use up its resources, leading to increasing tiredness and susceptibility to illness. Psychosomatic disorders begin to appear.
3. **The stage of exhaustion.** When the body is drained of its resources, we see symptoms of anxiety, irritability, avoidance of responsibilities and relationships, self-destructive behaviour, and poor judgment.

Whether we are dealing with problems at home, at work, or travelling between locations, we are constantly faced with stressors. We can counter the stress response by activating the relaxation response.

The relaxation response

This is the opposite of the stress response. It activates the parasympathetic nervous system and releases “feel good” hormones. This has numerous benefits, including:

- muscles relax, reducing muscle tension
 - chronic pain is reduced
- breathing becomes slower and deeper
 - heart rate slows down
 - blood pressure drops or stabilizes
- blood flow to the brain increases, improving concentration
 - confidence and ability to handle problems improves
- stress hormones are reduced, lowering fatigue
 - frustration and anger subside
 - mood improves
- digestion improves
 - blood sugar levels stabilize
- sleep quality improves

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_stress

Relaxation techniques

- Breath
 - This is the foundation for many relaxation techniques.
 - Sit or lay comfortably.
 - Your arms should be open, expanding your chest to allow full lung capacity.
 - Notice the quality of your breath. Each inhale and exhale should be smooth – there should be no jerkiness in your breath.
 - Gently slow down your breath, lengthening your inhale and exhale.
 - Quality is more important than quantity. If you feel “short of breath” or your breathing becomes jerky, you may be taking too long on each inhale/exhale – don’t push too hard.



- Meditation and Mindfulness
 - Meditation clears our minds and calms us down. It is a proven effective way to reduce stress and anxiety.
 - Mindfulness means being in the present moment. It means noticing the little things around you, being aware of your thoughts and feelings as well as the physical sensations and your environment.
 - Our brains have a negativity bias that can lead to depression for people who “live in the past” or anxiety for people who “live in the future”.
 - Mindfulness trains us to live in the present moment, overcoming this negativity bias.
 - A simple yet effective technique is to focus on the feeling between the tip of your nose and the top of your lips with each breath you take.
- Take time out for yourself
 - Pamper yourself – run a warm bath, use candles or soft light and relaxing music.
 - Read a good book.
 - Power nap.
 - Play.

- Exercise
 - Exercise releases endorphins and a chemical known as BDNF that work to protect the brain from stress and lead to a somewhat euphoric feeling afterwards.
 - Select a form of exercise that creates a meditative state, calming the mind, while improving the quality of breath, e.g.
 - Yoga
 - Tai Chi
 - Running, Walking, Swimming, Dancing, Rowing, Climbing or any other exercise that requires a flow of repetitive movement.
- Organise yourself
 - Create a list of what you need to do
 - Prioritise what is important.
 - Accept your human limitations if those things at the bottom of the list don't get done.
 - Work before play
 - Get your priority tasks done, then relax.
 - Make sure you allow sufficient time to relax at the end of each day.
 - Find a balance in the time you allocate for work and relaxation.
 - Identify what you can and can't control
 - Apply the Serenity Prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference."
 - Declutter – throw out what you don't need
 - This can be symbolic – decluttering your environment can help declutter your mind.
- Bodywork – break the muscle tension/pain cycle
 - Massage, Acupuncture, Feldenkrais Method, Myotherapy, Reflexology, Kinesiology – these are examples of specialist healing professions that are available to help you.
 - Self-massage (ask Centenary Yoga to show you how to make and use a massage ball).
 - Identify where you carry tension and actively work on relaxing that area
 - Pay particular attention to relaxing your jaw, neck and shoulders.
- Nature-based activities
 - Gardening, Bushwalking – as little as 15 minutes in a natural setting can improve our wellbeing.
 - Sunshine – spending some time outside during daylight hours is important for our physical and mental health, due to the role this plays in resetting our circadian rhythms.
- Smile and laugh
 - Smiling makes us feel good and it makes others feel good
 - Endorphins are released with smiling and laughing.
 - Don't fake smile. Instead, think positive thoughts to inspire smiling.
 - Watch a funny movie – laughter is the best medicine.



- Hobbies/pastimes
 - Sewing, singing, painting, photography.
- Develop positive attitudes and relationships
 - Change negative self-talk to positive
 - Affirmations – the moment you notice a negative thought starting, replace this with a positive statement.
 - Remind yourself of the “big picture” – “don’t sweat the small stuff”.
 - Journal
 - Positive reflections – make a list of good things that happened. This can help you retrain your brain to notice the good things in life.
 - Gratitude – make a list of things you are grateful for. Share your gratitude with others.
 - Strengthen friendships with warm/happy people
 - Avoid toxic people – avoid being a toxic person.
 - Stress is contagious. Negative people spread negativity, transmitting stress.
 - Happiness is also contagious. Being with happy people increases our own level of happiness.
 - Communicate with kindness
 - Avoid being judgemental.
 - Practice being sympathetic and empathetic, understanding and forgiving.
 - Use the three gates before speaking (Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?)
 - Help someone else
 - Acts of kindness are proven to be the most reliable means of increasing happiness.
 - Showing kindness to someone else not only makes them feel good, it helps you feel valued, building your self-esteem and bringing on that warm-fuzzy feeling inside yourself.

- Value your partner, friends and family
 We tend to take what we have for granted, forgetting how special the gift of friendship is. This leads us to undervalue those closest to us. Instead, treat each moment with those closest to you as though it is the first or last – the only moment (living in the present).

- Hug
 - When we hug someone, there is a natural release of Oxytocin.
 - Hugs decrease feelings of loneliness, combat fear, increase self-esteem, defuse tension and show appreciation.
 - If you don’t have the opportunity to hug a person, hug a pet.



Making it work

1. Notice tension

Is your breath becoming short and shallow or irregular? Are you starting to feel tired, frustrated or angry? Learn to notice the signs of increasing tension. This can be particularly difficult for those of us who feel constantly stressed. ‘Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.’³

2. Choose the right technique

The way in which you respond to stress will determine which relaxation techniques are most effective for you. Choose which of the following three options best matches you:

- Do you become agitated and angry when stressed? This is the “**fight**” response. Look for more calming relaxation techniques, such as meditation or restorative yoga.
- Do you withdraw and get depressed when stressed? This is the “**flight**” response. Practice more energizing relaxation techniques such as running or vinyasa yoga.
- Do you freeze and get stuck when stressed? This is the “**immobilization**” response. First activate your nervous system with a physical activity that engages both your arms and legs. Then observe whether you move to the “fight” or “flight” response to determine your choice of a calming or energizing relaxation technique.

3. Practice

Your ability to relax, like any other skill you have learnt, will improve with practise. Find the technique that best suits you and then have patience as you practise the technique. You will be more effective if you develop a regular program (e.g. meditating at the same time each morning or evening) and practise frequently.

Make sure how you manage your relaxation practise doesn’t add stress (rushing to finish a task at the office so that you can get to an exercise class on time).

The more stressed you are, the harder you may find it to relax. Have patience as the rewards (better health, longer life, greater happiness) are worth it.

4. Develop healthy habits

- Healthy food
 - Avoid excessive: refined sugar, caffeine and alcohol.
 - Try to eat more natural foods and less refined foods.
 - Drink plenty of water, eat fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

³ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045368>



- Create a bedtime ritual
 - Stress can make it more difficult to get good quality sleep, and insufficient sleep can exacerbate stress.
 - Avoid using blue-light devices such as mobile phones and tablets for at least an hour before going to sleep.
 - Avoid activities that exercise the brain (e.g. crosswords) and replace these with activities that calm the brain (e.g. reading).
 - A regular ritual of calming activities before going to sleep can produce an automatic response within the body that helps prepare for sleep.
- Posture
 - Avoid slumping. The body language of slumping suggests withdrawing from the world – an emotional state of unhappiness. The physical effect of slumping is reduced lung capacity, making the breath less effective. Long-term slumping weakens core and back muscles, affecting the curvature of the spine, with the potential to damage intervertebral discs and lead to ongoing health problems.
 - Pay attention to how you sit, stand and lay. Consciously correct bad posture until good posture becomes a habit.

Yoga for relaxation

Yoga combines the benefits of exercise, meditation and breathing techniques, making it ideal for relaxation.

There are many different styles of Yoga.

If you have a “fight” response to stress, you may prefer a style of Yoga that involves little movement such as:

- Restorative Yoga – poses aim to achieve total comfort without any effort. They are each held for a few minutes while laying or seated and generally involve support from cushions that are strategically placed to enhance comfort.
- Yin Yoga – poses are also each held for a few minutes while laying or seated, but generally without support from cushions and here the aim is to enhance the stretch rather than achieving maximum comfort.

If you have a “flight” response to stress, you may prefer more energetic styles of Yoga, such as:

- Vinyasa or “Flow” Yoga – each pose is held for a few breaths, or even a single breath, before flowing to the next pose. Sequences are typically built around the classic “Sun Salutation” (Surya Namaskar). Movement and breath between each pose are as important as in the pose itself. The concentration needed for breath, movement and pose helps achieve a meditative state in the practice.
- Ashtanga Vinyasa – similar to Vinyasa, but using set sequences of poses developed by the founder of the system, Pattabhi Jois.

There are many other Yoga styles laying between these two sets of extremes. A “general” or “Hatha” Yoga class should provide relaxation benefits for most people,



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including both “Fight” and “Flight” personalities, as long as they incorporate the fundamental elements of:

- Breathing techniques (pranayama) – the teacher should guide the student in when to inhale and when to exhale as they perform the pose (Asana) and transition between poses. Specific pranayama techniques (e.g. alternate nostril breathing) may be included, but are not essential.
- Calming the mind – there are many techniques that could be used, with much crossover with meditation techniques.
- Savasana as the final pose – this is a resting pose that is always used at the end of a Yoga class. It plays an important role in yoga’s activation of the parasympathetic nervous system.

In addition, two common Yoga practices are worthy of mention for their specific benefits for calming the nervous system:

- Alternate nostril breathing (Nadi Shodana)

Breathing in and out of each side of the nostril in a set sequence, this technique works on balancing energy flows in each side of the body and brain. It is widely regarded for its effectiveness in calming the nervous system and has a proven ability to reduce stress, lowering heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure.⁴

- Yogic sleep (Yoga Nidra)

A beautiful technique for achieving deep relaxation. The body is in a state of sleep, yet the mind is conscious. It has been described as “conscious deep sleep” and proponents claim ½ hour of Yoga Nidra to be the equivalent of 2 hours sleep.

⁴ Cronkleton, E. (2018) <https://www.healthline.com/health/alternate-nostril-breathing>.