

The 5 Stages to Relaxation

Any relaxation exercise involves learning five separate stages. Each stage builds on the one before it, so be sure to follow all five stages in their listed order. You may find it useful to record a tape to guide you through the exercises that follow. A tape will help you focus on relaxing your body and free you to close your eyes. To make a tape use the instructions for each step as your script, speak in a slow, even voice and be sure not to rush through the process.

When you practice relaxation you will find that mental focus alone is enough to drain your muscles of their tension, with no need for you to tense them first. Developing this skill depends on your ability to recognize the difference between clenched muscles and deeply relaxed ones. Be sure that you are comfortable before you begin the following exercises.

Stage One - Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation will help you recognize the difference between tension and relaxation in each of the major groups. Surprising as it may sound, these distinctions are easily overlooked. Once you can really feel the difference between a tense muscle and a deeply relaxed one you will be able to identify your chronic trouble spots and consciously rid them of locked-in tension. You will also be able to bring your muscle to a deeper state of relaxation after you relax. Follow the exercise below and give yourself one to two weeks to master the technique, with two fifteen minute practice sessions per day. Your goal should be to relax your entire body in one fifteen to twenty minute's session.

Curl both fists tightening biceps and forearms, and then relax. Roll your head around on your neck clockwise in a complete circle then reverse the action and relax.

Wrinkle up the muscles in your face like a walnut, now wrinkle your forehead, eyes, mouth and shoulders and relax.

Arch your shoulders and back. As you do so, take a deep breath into your chest. Hold and relax. Now take another deep breath and press out the stomach, hold and relax.

Straighten your legs and point your toes back towards your face tightening your shins. Now hold and relax. Straighten your legs and curl your toes simultaneously tightening calves thighs and buttocks and relax.

Repeat this procedure at least once tensing each muscle group for five to seven seconds and then relax for fifteen to thirty seconds. Remember to notice the contrast between the sensations of tension and relaxation. Once you have mastered "Progressive Muscle Relaxation" you can move on to stage two, known as "Release Only Relaxation."

Stage Two - Release only Relaxation

Now that you have felt the difference between tensing and relaxing each muscle group you are ready to move on to stage two. As you might guess from the name, release only relaxation cuts out the first steps in progressive muscle relaxation, the tensing step. This means that you can cut the time down by half helping you to achieve deep relaxation in each muscle group.

Sit in a comfortable chair with your arms at your side and move around a bit until you are comfortable.

Begin to focus on your breathing, breathe in deeply and feel the pure air fill your stomach, lower chest and upper chest. Hold your breathe for a moment as you sit up straighter and then breathe out slowly through your mouth, feeling all tension and worry blow out in a stream. After you have exhaled completely relax your stomach and your chest. Continue to take full, calm even breaths, noticing that you are becoming more relaxed with each breath.

Now relax your forehead smoothing out all the lines. Keep breathing deeply and now relax your eyebrows. Just let all the tension melt away, all the way down to your jaw. Let it all go. Now let your lips separate and relax your tongue. Breathe in and breathe out and relax your throat. Notice how peaceful and loose your entire face feels now.

Roll your head gently and feel you neck relax. Release your shoulders. Just let them drop all the way down. Your neck is loose and your shoulders are heavy and low. Now let the relaxation travel down through your arms to your fingers tips. Your arms are heavy and loose. Your lips are still separated because your jaw is relaxed too.

Breathe in deeply and relax your stomach, expand your chest. Hold your breath for a moment and then breathe out slowly in a smooth stream through your mouth.

Let the feeling of relaxation spread to your stomach. Feel all the muscles in your abdomen release their tension as it assumes its natural shape. Relax your waist and relax your back. Continue to breathe deeply. Notice how loose and heavy the upper half of your body feels.

Now relax the lower half of your body. Feel your buttocks sink into the chair. Relax your thighs. Relax your knees. Feel the relaxation travel through your calves to your ankles, to the bottoms of your feet, all the way down to the tips of your toes. Your feet feel warm and heavy on the floor in front of you. With each breath feel the relaxation deepen.

Now scan your body for tension as you continue to breathe. Your legs are relaxed. Your back is relaxed. Your shoulders and arms are relaxed. Your face is relaxed. There is only a feeling of peace, warmth and relaxation.

If any muscle was hard to relax, turn your attention to it now. Is it your back, your shoulders, your thighs or your jaw? Tune into the muscle and now tense it. Hold it tighter and release. Feel it join the rest of your body in a deep relaxation.

The directions for release only relaxation may seem simpler than progressive muscle relaxation, however, the tasks involved are actually a bit more complex. Be certain that you are draining all of the tension out of each muscle you focus on. Do not let the tension creep back in, as you turn your attention to different muscles. When you stand up after a session of

release only, you should feel relaxed. Of course you do not want to stress yourself out by pushing yourself through a set of strict directions. Try to allow your body to relax rather than forcing it. If you have trouble with a particular step take a deep breathe and try it again or skip it. Let negative and critical thoughts blow away with each breath and hold on to the feeling of success and deeper peace. Allow yourself one to two weeks with two practice sessions a day to master release only relaxation. When you can relax your entire body in one to seven minutes sessions you are ready to move on to step three.

Stage Three - Cue Controlled Relaxation

Cue controlled relaxation reduces the time you need to relax even further down to two or three minutes in most cases. In this stage you will focus on your breathing and condition yourself to relax exactly when you tell yourself to. The instructions will help you build an association between a cue, for example the command “relax” and true muscle relaxation. Be sure that you are comfortable with Release Only Relaxation before you begin.

Make yourself comfortable in a chair with your arms at your sides and your feet flat on the ground. Take a deep breath and hold it for a moment. Concentrate on blowing the worries of the day far far away as you release the air in a smooth stream from your mouth. Empty your lungs entirely and then feel your stomach and your chest relax.

Now begin to relax yourself from your forehead all the way down to your toes, using your release only technique. See if you can relax yourself completely in thirty seconds, if you need more time, that's fine. (If you have made a tape pause here for half a minute to allow time to relax.

You feel peaceful and at ease now. Your stomach and chest are moving in and out slow with even breaths. With each breath the feeling of relaxation deepens.

Continue to breathe deeply and regularly saying “breathe in” to yourself, as you inhale and relax as you exhale. (If you are making a tape recording, say these words on the tape allowing about eight seconds for each repetition) Breathe in Relax, Breathe in Relax Breathe in ... Relax Breathe in ... Relax Breathe in ... Relax.
Feel each breathe bring peace and calming, floaty worry and tension out.

Continue to breathe this way for several minutes saying the words breathe in and relax as you breathe. (Do not record the words again on your tape as this section is most effective when you say the words to yourself in silence) Focus all your attention on the words in your head and on the process of breathing. Feel your muscles relax more and more deeply with each breath. Let the words relax, clouding every other thought from your mind. Close your eyes if you can, to deepen your focus. (If you are making a tape, allow one to two minutes of silence before continuing to record the instructions).

Now listen to the words again as you continue to breathe in and relax. Breathe in ...Relax Breathe in ... Relax Breathe in ... Relax Breathe in ... Relax Breathe in ... Relax.

Continue to breathe saying these words in your head for a few minutes. Now feel each breathe bring peace and calm in and float worry and tension out. (Stop recording the tape here).

If you have time repeat the entire process of Cue Controlled Relaxation after a recovery period of between ten and fifteen minutes.

Practice Cue Controlled Relaxation twice a day as you did with the earlier stages. After each session you may want to make a note of the amount of time you needed to relax and how deeply relaxed you become. Most people find that the actual time required to relax at this stage is shorter than they imagine. Aim to relax completely using Cue Controlled Relaxation within two to three minutes before moving on to stage four, Rapid Relaxation.

Stage Four - Rapid Relaxation

Rapid relaxation can bring the time you need to relax down to thirty seconds. Being able to relax that quickly can mean real relief during stressful situations. It is a good idea to practice rapid relaxation many times a day as you move through different activities and states of mind.

In Rapid Relaxation you will pick a special relaxation cue. Choose something that you see regularly throughout the day, such as your watch or a certain clock or the picture you pass as you walk down the hall to the bathroom. If you can mark that special cue with a piece of colored tape while you are practicing this technique, it will help.

When you are ready to begin, look at your special cue. Breathe in and relax. Continue to look at your cue and think relax. Breathe in and relax. You are breathing deeply and evenly and you continue to think relax, each time you exhale. Let the relaxation spread throughout your body. Scan your body for tension and relax as much as possible in every muscle that is not needed for whatever activity you are currently doing.

Every time you look at your cue throughout the day go through these simple steps.

Take two or three deep even breaths, exhaling slowly through your mouth.

Think relax, each time you exhale as you continue to breathe deeply.

Scan your body for any tension. Focus on muscles that need to relax and empty them of tension.

Try to use your relaxation cue fifteen to twenty times a day to relax quickly in natural non stressful situations. This will instill the habit of checking yourself for tension and moving back to a state of deep relaxation throughout the day.

After your first few days of practice, you may want to change the color of the tape on your relaxation cue or even change the cue altogether. This will keep the idea of relaxation fresh in your mind. Finally see if you can use rapid relaxation to calm yourself during one or two particularly stressful moments of the day.

Stage five is “Applied Relaxation”. This will help you refine this ability, however, it a good idea to open yourself up early to the idea of relaxation during crisis. When you feel comfortable with Rapid Relaxation and are able to achieve a state of deep relaxation in twenty to thirty seconds many times during the day you are ready to move on to the final stage of Applied Relaxation training.

Stage Five - Applied Relaxation

The final stage involves relaxing quickly in the face of anxiety and provoking situations. You will use the same techniques that you have practiced in Rapid Relaxation, beginning with your deep breathing the moment you notice stress reaction setting in. As soon as you note a sign of stress begin your next three steps.

Take two or three deep even breaths

Think these calming words to yourself as you continue to breathe deeply. Breathe in ... Relax, Breathe in ... Relax, Breathe in ... Relax. If you prefer you need only hear yourself think relax each time you exhale.

Scan your body for tension and concentrate on relaxing the muscles that you do not need to continue your activity.

To begin coming close to the feeling of your stress reaction, start by practicing these instructions after you have run up a flight of stairs or completed some jumping jacks. When you feel confident, visualize a stressful situation such as a fight with your partner or an unpleasant encounter with your boss. Finally, practice using these three steps when you encounter a stressful situation in real life. Take a brief moment to collect yourself and remember the three steps and then put them into effect immediately. No one but you needs to know what you are doing and you and those around you will benefit from the calmness with which you approach the crisis in hand.

Be patient with yourself. Applied Relaxation is a skill and as with other skills you will refine your ability with practice. Chances are, you will not feel complete relief the first time you try to cut through a deeply stressful situation with Applied Relaxation. Notice the improvements that you do make. Most people are able to stop anxiety from increasing with little practice. From that point it is just a few short steps to actually decreasing the anxiety and replacing panic with a feeling of calm and control.

If you have had trouble meditating after you have followed this five steps you will meditate with no trouble. This will then lead you to enlightenment and you will start to understand who you really are.

WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE?

