

Relaxing Exercises to Relieve Stress



UHN

For patients and families



Read this pamphlet to learn ways to relax to help you manage stress and lower anxiety.

Ways to relax include:

- deep breathing
- relaxing your muscles
- repeating words that make you feel relaxed
- imagining relaxing images

Read more to see which one will work best for you.

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How relaxing can help

Getting diagnosed and going through treatment can be hard on your body and your emotions. It is normal for you to feel worried, stressed, sad or angry.

Relaxation is any exercise that helps you lower stress and deal with emotions. Doing relaxing exercise may also help you cope with both everyday stress and stress you may be feeling about your health problems, such as cancer and pain.

Learning basic relaxing exercises is easy. They are often free or at a low cost, have little risk, and can be done just about anywhere.

Ways to relax

1. **Deep breathing**
2. **Relaxing your muscles**
3. **Repeating words that make you feel relaxed**
4. **Imagining relaxing images**

Below, you will read more about each exercise and how to do them.

For any relaxing exercise:

- **Find a quiet place.** Relaxing music can help to block out noise or distractions.
- **Set aside time just for you and let yourself relax.** Relaxing is a way of taking care of yourself.
- **Be patient and practise.** Learning to relax at a deep level takes practice. Do not feel as if you have failed if you do not feel relaxed right away.

Deep breathing

Deep breathing exercises may help when you feel tense or stressed, have trouble falling asleep, or just want to relax. Deep breathing is easy to learn and can be done almost anywhere, anytime and in any position.

When you are deep breathing, you can see your stomach expand when you breathe in, and shrink when you breathe out. This is because deep breathing uses the muscles under your rib cage, called the diaphragm. This is different from shallow breathing where you do not use your diaphragm and you only see your chest moving when you breathe in and out.

If you are just starting out, try to practise basic deep breathing for a few minutes each day and do it more as you feel more comfortable.

1. Find a comfortable position, like sitting in a chair or lying on your back.
2. Put your left hand on your stomach and your right hand on your chest.
3. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose.
When you breathe in, your stomach should push your left hand out and your right hand should not move.
4. Breathe out slowly and gently through pursed lips, like you are blowing out candles. Your left hand should slowly move back in as you blow air out of your lungs.
5. Repeat this deep breathing 3 to 10 more times. Do this once a day or more as needed.

Tips for your practice

- Keep your body relaxed during the breathing exercise.
- Do not rush. Take your time with each breath.
- Stop if you feel dizzy and try again another time.
- Use pictures in your mind to help you focus and breathe. For example, when breathing in, imagine that your arms and legs are straws and the air is being drawn into every part of your body. When breathing out, imagine you are slowly blowing out candles on a cake.

Relaxing your muscles

This way of relaxing may help you lower your anxiety and stress by tensing then relaxing your muscles. This is done with one area of your body at a time, moving slowly up or down your body. For example, start with your feet and move up towards your forehead.

1. Find a comfortable position.

You can sit in a chair or lie on your back. Loosen any tight clothing, and take a few slow and even breaths.

2. Start at your feet.

Slowly tighten the muscles in your feet and toes for 10 seconds until you are squeezing as hard as you can. Then, slowly relax the muscles as you count for 20 seconds. Notice all the tension melting away. Keep breathing slowly and evenly.

3. Move to your legs.

Slowly tighten the muscles in your thighs and calves for 10 seconds. Squeeze the muscles as hard as you can. Then, slowly relax the muscles as you count for 20 seconds. Notice the tension melting away and the relaxing feeling that is left.

4. Move to your buttocks.

Slowly squeeze the muscles in your buttocks for 10 seconds. Squeeze as hard as you can. Then, slowly relax the muscles as you count for 20 seconds. Notice the tension melting away. Keep breathing slowly and evenly.

5. Move to your arms and hands.

Draw both your hands into fists. Bend your elbows and pull your fists to your chest. Squeeze your arms and fists as tight as you can and hold for 10 seconds. Then, slowly relax your hands and arms as you count for 20 seconds. Notice how relaxed you feel.

6. Move to your neck and shoulders.

Slowly add tension into your neck and shoulders by raising your shoulders up towards your ears and hold for 10 seconds. Slowly release the tension as you count for 20 seconds. Notice the tension melting away.

7. Move to your jaw.

Tense the muscles in your jaw and hold for 10 seconds. Then release the tension slowly as you count for 20 seconds. Notice how relaxed you feel. Keep breathing slowly and evenly.

8. Move to your forehead.

Squeeze the muscles in your forehead and hold for 10 seconds. Be careful only to tense the forehead muscles and leave the rest of your body relaxed. Then, slowly release the tension in your forehead as you count for 20 seconds. Notice the difference in how your muscles feel and how relaxed you are.

Tips for your practice

- Do not rush. Do each step slowly.
- Let your muscles fully relax in between steps.
- Once you are done with an area of your body, try to keep it relaxed.

Repeating words that make you feel relaxed

This exercise uses words that will help parts of your body relax. Words that help parts of your body feel warm and heavy can help slow down your heart beat and breathing. With practice, you will teach your body to respond to your relaxing thoughts quickly.

1. Find a comfortable position, like sitting in a chair or lying on your back.
2. Close your eyes and picture yourself in a peaceful place (your garden, on the beach).
3. Start with a body part, like your hands. Say each phrase below 5 times. Pause between each phrase to feel the relaxed, warm and heavy feeling in each body part.
 - “My hands are heavy and warm.”
 - “My arms are heavy and warm.”
 - “My shoulders are heavy and warm.”
 - “My feet are heavy and warm.”
 - “My calves are heavy and warm.”
 - “My legs are heavy and warm.”
4. Enjoy how feeling warm and heavy makes you feel relaxed.

Imaging relaxing images

Using images that make you feel good can help your body relax. You can imagine you are in a place that brings calmness and peace to your mind. This can be real, pretend, in the present or in the past. It can be used with deep breathing or when you are repeating words that make you feel relaxed.

1. Find a comfortable position, like sitting in a chair or lying on your back.
2. Close your eyes and picture yourself in a calm, peaceful place (lying on a warm beach, swinging in a hammock, sitting in your favourite chair or walking through a garden).
3. Picture what you would see in this place (the green grass, the bright sunlight, colourful flowers).
4. Think of the sounds you would hear (water flowing, birds singing, leaves rustling).
5. Remember different smells (wildflowers, salty sea air).
6. Think about how things would feel to the touch (soft sand, warm soothing water).
7. Remember the different tastes (fresh water, freshly baked cookies).

Tip for your practice

Some memories or images may bring back sad feelings. If this happens, think of new images or memories that do not make you feel sad.

More resources for relaxation

At the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre:

“Relaxation Therapy” Classes

For more information, including class times and locations:

- Pick up a copy of the “Patient Education & Survivorship Calendar of Events” from the Princess Margaret, Patient & Family Library (main floor)
- Visit www.theprincessmargaret.ca
Click on “See Calendar” under “Classes and Activities” and search for the class.

For one-on-one relaxation training, please call 416-946-4501 extension 5580 for more information.

Relaxation CDs

These CDs can guide you through different relaxing exercises. You can borrow a CD from the Princess Margaret’s Patient & Family Library on the main floor.

In your community

You can search the internet for community groups close to your home that have relaxation programs. Below are some examples in the greater Toronto area that offer free relaxation classes for patients.

Some of these groups may also have other locations in Ontario. Check their websites for more information.

- **Wellspring:**
www.wellspring.ca
- **Gilda's Club Greater Toronto:**
www.gildasclubtoronto.org

