

Tips and Exercises to Help You Relax

Information for patients with a heart problem

It's normal to feel anxious or worried about your heart problem and what might happen. But, the stress and anxiety you feel can increase the strain on your heart. It's important to relax so you don't overwork your heart.

Read this booklet to learn:

- Some tips to help you relax
- Exercises that will help you relax, manage stress and lower anxiety
- Where you can find other helpful resources

This information may be helpful to you both in the hospital and at home.





Tips to help you relax

- ✓ **Set aside time just for you to relax.** It is important for you to care for yourself. Try not to feel guilty about it.
- ✓ **Find a quiet place to relax.** Playing relaxing music may also help you to block out any other noises, especially while you are in the hospital.
- ✓ **Spend 15 to 20 minutes of your day sitting quietly, breathing deeply or imagining yourself in a peaceful place.** This can be the first step in learning to relax.
- ✓ **Be patient with yourself.** Learning how to relax takes time and practice, especially learning how to relax deeply. Don't be too hard on yourself if you don't get it right away. This will only cause you more stress.
- ✓ **If you can, take a short nap after lunch or rest for a few minutes every couple of hours.** This can help you recharge and plan out your time.
- ✓ **Rest after meals, especially before starting any physical activity.** This helps your body digest your food and helps you avoid over-tiring yourself.
- ✓ **Try to manage strong emotions.** If you become angry or upset, count to 10 slowly, and breathe deeply. If you still feel angry, leave the situation and take some time to calm down. Continue to take slow breaths until you feel your heart rate slow down.
- ✓ **Think about joining a support group.** At a support group, you can meet others with the same problems and ask them what they do to help them relax.
- ✓ **Learn what your limits are and set them.** For example, it's ok to ask others for help if you need it. Or, it's ok to say no when you feel too overwhelmed or stressed to help others. Feeling pressured can increase your stress.
- ✓ **Be flexible.** Understand that things you don't expect may happen. Being flexible will help you cope with stress and anxiety when things don't happen as planned.

- ✓ **Find a way to relax that works for you** (for example deep breathing, repeating relaxing words, meditating). You can do this on your own or with others. You can also ask a member of your health care team for help to learn these skills.

Exercises to help you relax

Deep breathing

Deep breathing exercises may help you when you feel tense or stressed, have trouble falling asleep, or just want to relax. You can do these exercises almost anywhere, anytime and in any position.

1. Find a comfortable position, like sitting in a chair or lying on your back.
2. Relax your body and let your shoulders drop.
3. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose.
4. Purse your lips while you slowly breathe out (like you are blowing out a candle). Try to breathe out slowly and evenly for twice as long as you breathe in. Try not to gasp for air when you feel short of breath.
5. Take long, slow deep breaths. Pay attention to the flow of your breath as you become more relaxed. Think about relaxing each muscle group in your body to release all your tension as you exhale.
6. While you breathe, focus on your breathing or a word, like calm.
7. Continue deep breathing until your breathing evens out and you feel relaxed.

You can also use images in your mind to help with your deep breathing. For example, when you breathe in, imagine your body is a sponge taking in air to all of your body's cells. When you breathe out, imagine you are gently blowing out a candle.

Repeating words that make you feel relaxed

This exercise is also called autogenics. It uses words to help teach parts of your body to 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. Start by finding a comfortable position. Close your eyes and imagine that you are in a peaceful and relaxing place.
2. Say the phrases below to yourself several times, but pause in between. This time will help you to take in the feelings of warmth and heaviness.

“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.”

Notice how relaxed you feel at the end of the exercise.

Using your imagination to relax

This type of exercise is also called guided imagery. It is a way to use your imagination to relax.

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 the 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).

There are recordings you can listen to on CDs or on the internet that can help. You may find this exercise helpful at bedtime. It can help you fall asleep or quiet your mind.

Relaxing your muscles

This exercise is also called passive muscle relaxation. Stress can cause your muscles to become tense (for example, in your shoulders, neck, and upper back). When you do this exercise, you think about all of your muscles becoming relaxed.

1. Find a comfortable position. You can sit on a chair or lie on your back. Loosen any tight clothing and take a few slow and even breaths.
2. Start to think about relaxing each muscle group in your body. For example:
 - Start with your face and neck. Think about all the muscles in your forehead, jaw, cheeks and neck relaxing. Notice any tension melting away. Keep breathing slowly and evenly.

Do the same with your:

- shoulders
- upper back
- arms (including your upper arm, elbow, and forearm)
- hands (including your wrist and fingers)
- lower back
- middle of your body (stomach area)
- legs (including your hips, thighs, knees, shins and calves)
- feet (including your ankles and toes)

Note: This is not progressive muscle relaxation where you first tense and then relax your muscles. Talk with your health care provider if you want to do progressive muscle relaxation because this exercise can be harder on your heart.

Meditation

Meditation is an exercise that helps calm your mind and body. It is a skill that takes time to learn and practice. Some religious groups use meditation as a kind of prayer, but there are many kinds that are not religious. Meditation like **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction** can help reduce your stress.

If you are interested in learning about meditation, you can find programs and classes in your community.

Other ways to relax

There are many other ways to relax. These can include things like Tai Chi, yoga, hobbies like fishing, reading, crafts, or light exercise. Talk with your health care provider before you do physical activities to make sure it's safe.

Other helpful resources

Here are some reliable resources to help you learn more about ways to relax:

Mindfulness Stress Reduction Programs

University Health Network (UHN)

Phone: 416 340 4452 for more information

Heart and Stroke Foundation

Website: www.heartandstroke.ca

UHN Patient & Family Libraries

Toronto General Hospital

Peter and Melanie Munk Patient & Family Learning Centre and Library

Norman Urquhart Building – Level 1

585 University Avenue

Phone: 416 340 4800, extension 5951 | Email: tgpen@uhn.ca

The Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

Patient & Family Library

Main Floor, Atrium, 610 University Avenue

Phone: 416 946 4501, extension 5383 | Email: patienteducationpmh@uhn.ca

Toronto Western Hospital

Paul B. Helliwell Patient & Family Library

West Wing – 1st floor

399 Bathurst Street

Phone: 416 603 6277 | Email: twpfl@uhn.ca

Toronto Rehab, University Centre

Please note that there are no materials available for borrow.

Toronto Rehab patients are welcome to call, email or visit the Toronto General Hospital's Patient & Family Learning Centre for health information.

Check the local community groups in your area.

Check with your employer. They may resources to help you cope, such as an Employee Assistance Programs.

Free mobile apps to help you relax

Apple and Android software applications or “apps” are available for free from app stores. Please see the Relaxation Techniques section of the [Health & Wellness Mobile Apps](#) list created by our UHN Patient Librarians.

https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Patient_Family_Education/Libraries/Documents/Libraries_Mobile_Health_List.pdf [[PDF](#) opens in new window]

Important: This is not a full list of apps or products. The University Health Network does not recommend one company over another and is not responsible for any apps listed. Please contact each company directly to find out more.



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