



Work/Life Services Newsletter December 2018
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Too Tense? Learn to Relax

The scenario has become an increasingly familiar one. You go to the doctor with a stomachache or other minor ailment that just doesn't seem to go away. Unable to find anything wrong, the doctor tells you that you're "stressed out" and that you need to relax more. You want to take his advice to heart, but you're not sure what to do.

Experts say that effective relaxation requires more than simply vegging out in front of the TV set. It means learning a few relaxation techniques to combat stress -- a condition recently linked to a host of physical and emotional problems like heart disease, headaches, asthma and insomnia.

In times of stress, your body produces various chemicals, such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol, that put the body on alert and send your cardiovascular system into overdrive. In other words, your muscles tense, you breathe faster, and your pulse quickens. Scientists call it the "fight-or-flight" response, and no doubt it enabled our cave-dwelling ancestors to react quickly to imminent danger, such as the unexpected appearance of a saber-toothed tiger at teatime.

Today's comparatively more mundane threats, such as the traffic jam that threatens to make you late for a meeting, produce the very same reactions.

And unless you make an effort to alleviate those stresses through relaxation, your blood pressure may rise, your immune system's ability to fight disease may drop a notch and you may indeed begin to suffer from stomach and muscle aches and other stress-related symptoms. Turning on the TV -- particularly violent TV -- probably won't help. More than likely, it will just stimulate production of those chemicals that trigger a fight-or-flight response. It's better that you do something that reduces or eliminates the production of those chemicals, says Barbara Moeller, a New Jersey stress therapist.

Here are some techniques you can practice to relax more deeply and effectively:

Paul J. Rosch, M.D., president of the nonprofit organization American Stress Institute, says that

what you think about can affect your stress levels. To see how this is true, try this exercise:

Imagine arguing with someone you don't like. Notice how your pulse quickens, your jaw tightens and your muscles tense? Now take a few minutes to imagine a more pleasant situation, such as napping on a warm beach. Notice how your heartbeat slows and muscles loosen up?

You've just witnessed how guided imagery -- similar to good old-fashioned daydreaming -- can help you to relax. To relax further:

- Sit or lie comfortably and close your eyes.
- Imagine a situation or scene that you find comforting or relaxing, such as a quiet stroll in the park.
- Try to involve as many of your senses as possible. If you're envisioning a beach, for example, imagine seeing the blue sky, hearing the waves crashing, smelling the salt air, feeling the warm sun and tasting great ice cream.
- Repeat an affirmation, like "I'm releasing tension now," to yourself as you keep the scene fixed in your mind.

There's no way to overstate the value of regular aerobic exercise, such as riding a bicycle, walking or jogging, to help your body relax, say experts. Regular exercise not only improves your fitness, it produces endorphins -- chemicals in the brain that counteract the stress chemicals and produce a feeling of well-being.

One variation on exercise you might try is yoga, which uses stretching techniques to strengthen the body and quiet the mind. Yoga helps relieve tension in the muscles and increase circulation in the body, experts say.

Not many of us are aware of just how much our own breathing reflects and affects our state of mind and stress levels, says David Feifel, M.D., Ph.D., associate professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego.

Fast, shallow breathing initiates anxiety, while slow, steady breathing invites a sense of calm, says Dr. Feifel, who adds that simply slowing your breathing can trigger relaxation in both the mind and the body.

Here's a simple technique you can practice anywhere, even in the car:

- Take a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds.
- Imagining that you're blowing all the tension from your body, purse your lips and exhale slowly. Repeat several times.

"Relaxation techniques can give you a whole new perspective," says Dr. Feifel. "They can do more than just reduce stress; they can help you can gain the ability to extract a greater appreciation of the richness of life."

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