



Techniques for relaxing mind and body



In the midst of a long work shift, you may feel that you have little time for many stress management strategies. Breathing exercises, mindful meditation, and progressive relaxation techniques can be a powerful prevention tool against ongoing stress. Some of the exercises below can be done “in the moment,” while others you can use regularly during breaks or down time:

Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises are one of the simplest ways to relax. This is partly because breathing slowly and rhythmically makes your body feel like it does when you are already relaxed, and this sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax. It also relaxes you by clearing the mind of other thoughts, as you focus on your breathing. Here are several different breathing exercises:

Belly breathing

Belly breathing is quick and easy. It’s a good one to start with.

- + Sit in a comfortable position.
- + Put one hand on your belly just below your ribs and the other hand on your chest.
- + Take a deep breath in through your nose, and let your belly push your hand out. Your chest shouldn’t move.
- + Then exhale through your mouth, letting your belly hand go back in.
- + Do this 5 to 10 times. Take your time with each breath.

Rolling breathing

The object of rolling breathing is to develop full use of your lungs and to focus on the rhythm of your breathing. You can do it in any position. However, while you are learning, it is best to lie on your back with your knees bent.

- + Put your left hand on your belly and right hand on your chest. Notice how your hands move as you breathe in and out.
- + Practice filling your lower lungs by breathing so that your “belly” (left) hand goes up when you inhale and your “chest” (right) hand remains still. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Do this 8 to 10 times.
- + When you have filled and emptied your lower lungs 8 to 10 times, add the second step to your breathing: Inhale first into your lower lungs as before, and then continue inhaling into your upper chest. As you do so, your right hand will rise and your left hand will fall a little as your belly falls.
- + As you exhale slowly through your mouth, make a quiet, whooshing sound as first your left hand and then your right hand fall. As you exhale, feel the tension leaving your body as you become more and more relaxed.
- + Practice breathing in and out this way for 3 to 5 minutes. Notice that the movement of your belly and chest rises and falls like the motion of rolling waves. Practice rolling breathing daily for several weeks until you can do it almost anywhere. You can use it as an instant relaxation tool anytime you need one.

4-7-8 breathing

This exercise also uses belly breathing to help you relax. You can do this either sitting or lying down.

- + To start, put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the belly breathing exercise.
- + Take a deep, slow breath from your belly, and silently count to 4 as you breathe in.
- + Hold your breath while you silently count from 1 to 7.
- + Breathe out slowly as you silently count from 1 to 8. Try to get all the air out of your lungs by the time you count to 8.
- + Repeat 3 to 7 times or until you feel calm.

Morning breathing

Try this exercise when you first get up in the morning to relieve muscle stiffness and clear clogged breathing passages. Then use it throughout the day to relieve back tension.

- + From a standing position, bend forward from the waist with your knees slightly bent, letting your arms dangle close to the floor.
- + As you inhale slowly and deeply, return to a standing position by slowly rolling up, lifting your head last.
- + Hold your breath for just a few seconds in this standing position.
- + Exhale slowly as you return to the position of bending forward from the waist.
- + Repeat several times.

Mindful meditation

There are several types of meditation. One is called mindful meditation. It can help you relax because you're not worrying about what happened before or what may occur in the future. You stay in the present moment. The idea is to note what you experience without judging or trying to change it. After you practice this meditation for a while, you may find it easier to be mindful and relaxed in everyday life, even when not meditating.

Here is how it works:

- + Sit in a comfortable position, either in a chair or on the floor, or you can lie down. You can either close your eyes or look down, keeping your gaze a few inches in front of you on the floor.
- + Pay attention to your breathing. This is a good way to focus your attention on what is happening right now. Don't try to change your breathing. Just notice how it feels in your lungs and chest.
- + If your mind wanders, don't worry about it. Just notice your thoughts and then let them go, and bring your focus back to the present moment and your breathing. You may do this over and over again during a meditation session. That's okay.
- + During your meditation, you may feel certain emotions, such as anger, impatience, sadness, or happiness. Don't try to hold on to or get rid of these feelings. They are part of your experience of the present moment.
- + Keeping your attention on your breathing will help you stay focused in the here and now, and not get lost in thoughts of other places. For example, if you feel impatient to finish the meditation so you can start the laundry, see if you can focus on the feeling of the impatience rather than thoughts of the laundry. Where do you feel the impatience in your body? Does it feel tight? Does it affect your breathing?
- + When you're ready, wiggle your fingers and toes, open your eyes, and return to your day.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique relaxes the body by first contracting and then releasing each of the main muscle groups. This point-counterpoint process helps you relax more deeply and quickly than just releasing the muscles. To do progressive relaxation you can create your own audiotape to help you go through all the muscle groups, or you can just learn the procedure from the table below and work through them from memory.

- + Choose a place where you can lie down on your back and stretch out comfortably, such as a carpeted floor or an exercise mat.
- + Inhale and tense each muscle group (hard but not to the point of cramping) for 5 to 10 seconds, then exhale and suddenly relax the muscle group completely. Give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax, and then do the next group.

- + When you're finished with all muscle groups, return to alertness by counting backwards slowly from 5 to 1.

Following are the muscle groups and suggestions for how to tense them:

Muscle group	What to do
Forehead	Raise eyebrows as far as you can
Eyes	Clench eyelids tightly shut
Jaw	Purse lips and tighten jaw
Neck and shoulders	Pull and hold shoulders up toward ears
Arms	Hold out, lock elbows, tighten and hold
Hands	Clench fists
Chest and back	Tighten by taking a deep breath
Stomach	Suck in your stomach
Buttocks and thighs	Tighten by pulling your buttocks together
Lower legs	Tighten calf muscle by pulling foot towards you
Feet	Curl toes down