

# WELLNESS TIPS

## RELAXATION EXERCISES

Stress is associated with many different types of events, from seemingly minor daily irritations, to life adjustments related to Covid-19 over the past 6 months, to worries about financial problems, relationship worries, or worry about a family member's health.

Experiencing some stress is beneficial and the stress response is a normal reaction to a threatening situation, preparing the body to face that challenge. But if the stress response is too intense or a reaction to prolonged stressors, it can interfere with optimal functioning or contribute to chronic health problems.

Relaxation exercises can moderate the stress response – for example, slowing heart and breathing rates, decreasing muscle tension, decreasing anxiety, and facilitating sleep.

Because using relaxation techniques is a skill, it may take practice before positive effects are experienced. Try not to judge how well you are using a technique or how relaxed you feel (this can increase your stress) but recognize that it will improve with practice. Consider trying several different exercises, as some may be more effective for you than others.

Basic instructions include finding a quiet place to practice, limiting disruptions (such as turning off the phone), and a comfortable position. Close your eyes (if comfortable) and take several deep breaths. As you practice the exercise, your mind will probably wander. That's normal - just redirect your thoughts to the exercise. Daily practice for 20 – 30 minutes is desirable, but shorter and less frequent practices can also be helpful. Do what fits into your schedule.

There are a variety of relaxation exercises, including breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic relaxation techniques, and guided imagery. With the descriptions of following exercises, I have included some YouTube sites to check out (there are a ton out there if you are attracted to a type of exercise but don't like the ones I have cited). Once you understand the exercise, you may choose to do it without using your device.

### **Relaxation Breathing Techniques**

Breathing techniques are deceptively easy but can be very effective. Feeling anxious while waiting for your test to begin or before a small group presentation? These techniques can work well.

The basic technique is to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, with slow diaphragmatic breaths. You can tell if you are doing it correctly if a hand placed on your abdomen moves out when you inhale, and a hand placed on your chest doesn't move.

“15-Minute-Deep Breathing” City of Hope. January 16, 2015. This exercise begins with breathing, moves to an autogenic exercise and ends with guided imagery visualization:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F28MGLlpP90>

“Mindful Breathing Meditation (5 Minutes). September 28, 2017. She talks about sitting but you can easily use while lying in bed:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmFUDkj1Aq0>

### **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

PMR exercises focus on tensing and relaxing groups of muscles to release physical tension and help your body relax. They also can help by focusing your attention away from anxious thoughts or thoughts that may be keeping you awake as you focus on your muscles.

"Progressive Muscle Relaxation Done Correctly" by Ray Barrett of Life's Canvass. May 2013:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eHqfc8qQs0>

" Progressive Muscle Relaxation (female voice)" Newcastle Upon Tyne Hospital. March 2014 (There is also a version with a male voice.):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NSgpUUjReSQ>

"How to do Progressive Muscle Relaxation" Therapist Aid:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nZEdqcGVzo>

### **Autogenic Relaxation**

Autogenic exercises focus on relaxing your body with thoughts of heaviness and/or warmth. They are less physically active than the progressive muscle exercises. Some include imagery:

"Autogenic Relaxation" by Guernsey Health and Social Care. March 2, 2015. This one is “no frills” – no music in the background and no added visualization:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCXUOX28Rt8>

"A Mini Autogenic Relaxation for Stress and Anxiety". January 17, 2015. This one includes a beach visualization about warmth of the sand:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyS3WIAPF6o>

"Autogenic Training 1: Total Relaxation. Your First Step into Deep Relaxation.” The narrator has a very deep voice:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_sdaDwa2Ek](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_sdaDwa2Ek)

### **Guided Imagery Visualization Exercises**

Guided imagery exercises involve picturing yourself in a relaxing, enjoyable place, either a place well-known to you, a place you would like to visit, or an imaginary setting. Imagery includes

thinking about immersing yourself in the details of the experience using your five senses – what you would see, hear, feel, smell, taste:

“Guided Imagery Meditation.” Johns Hopkins All Children’s Hospital. April 15, 2016:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=35ch88kmlls>

“Guided Meditation – Tropical Beach - Deep Relaxation and Sleep.” The Honest Guys. December 16, 2014:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LKFp0Sy71c&t=126s>

“10-Minute Guided Meditation: The Paradise Beach.” The Honest Guys. August 1, 2017:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBSGH837pvc>

Once you have become skilled in using relaxation techniques, the relaxation response can be elicited readily. And as you become more aware of your body’s stress response, you can use the techniques earlier to moderate the stress response.

These techniques can be used in conjunction with other treatments or stress management strategies such as regular sleep routine, exercise, regular contact with supportive people in your life, problem management, and medication.

Relaxation techniques don’t work for everyone and some people can become more uncomfortable. If this occurs, discontinue using the exercise and consider talking with your primary care provider or mental health professional for assistance in identifying other strategies to use for coping with stress.

If you would like to receive assistance in learning relaxation exercises, feel free to schedule an appointment.

And, as always, contact MSCC counselors with questions or concerns and to schedule an appointment.

Stay well and stay healthy!

Liz Schacht [elizabeth-schacht@uiowa.edu](mailto:elizabeth-schacht@uiowa.edu)

MSCC [osac-mscc@uiowa.edu](mailto:osac-mscc@uiowa.edu) 319-335-8056 1240 MERF

If you would like to review previous Wellness Tips, check the CCOM Medical Student Counseling Center Website:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>