

RELAX!

You probably know that stress and tension affect your health, from anxiety and insomnia to asthma and digestive problems to heart attacks and stroke. Research on stress is pretty clear that there are real health benefits to reducing stress.

There are lots of things you can do to reduce stress without special relaxation exercises. Exercise clearly reduces stress, and has many other health benefits as well. But sometimes it helps to use some simple relaxation exercises—some derived from ancient meditation practices—to help your body and mind relax. Some people find that prayer works in much the same way.

Experiment with these techniques. Maybe one will work better for you than the others. Try it for just five minutes a day, then gradually build up to 15 or 20 minutes. See if it doesn't make you feel calmer, more ready to face your day.

Belly Breathing

Starting in a comfortable seated position or lying on your back, place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest.

As you inhale, consciously relax your abdominal muscles, tightening them with each exhalation. Feel your upper chest expand after you've expanded your belly. You'll be amazed at how much deeper your breathing is.

Continue breathing slowly in and out, focusing on your breathing and on your belly, and gently brush thoughts aside. This technique can also help to calm you throughout the day.

Focus Word

This technique is based on transcendental meditation practice, an ancient and extensively studied relaxation technique. First, choose a word or brief phrase, which becomes your focus or "mantra". Choose something simple, perhaps with some peaceful associations for you.

Silently repeat the word (or words) each time you exhale, breathing slowly and naturally. Don't concentrate on the word, just keep repeating it slowly. Don't worry if you notice that your attention is wandering, just gently resume your repetition.

The Body Scan

Lie on your back or sit comfortably in an upright position. Begin by observing your breathing, trying to breathe slowly and deeply through your nose. Then direct your attention to the sensations in the toes of your left foot, trying to stay aware of your toes and your breathing at the same time. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to your toes.

Move your attention step by step through your entire body, taking anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes, focusing on one part of your body at a time. When you reach the top of your head, imagine you can breathe in through the bottom of your feet and out through your scalp, and vice versa. The "let go" of the body entirely, and simply be aware of whatever enters your conscious mind, without analyzing or judging.

Guided Imagery

Just as frightening thoughts can make your hands sweat, your heart race, and your muscles contract, tranquil thoughts can help your body relax. Once you've made your body relax, maybe by using one of these techniques, conjure up a thought or an image that you find relaxing.

Let your imagination guide you to a peaceful, beautiful place, either real or not. Slowly take in all the details: the shapes, colors, textures, smells, sounds: like the feel of a warm spring breeze or water lapping at your feet. Enjoy it as long as you like.



Keep trying!

When you feel more relaxed, you will help others around you feel more relaxed too. You might find yourself enjoying life a little more.

If it doesn't help, talk it over with someone in Health Services (465-5263) or Counseling Services (465-5081).

Visit our web site: www.easterct/depts/health for a wonderful guided relaxation video.

On the run? Try this:
"Breathing in, I calm myself.
Breathing out, I smile."

This handout derived from materials in:
 Consumer Reports on Health, February 1998