An Introduction to Relaxation

Relaxation practices are a popular integrative way to improve health. In other words, they are a good way to integrate and balance your body, mind and spirit. These methods strengthen your recovery when they’re used along with standard hospital treatment (for example, medicine, talk therapy or skills training).

Relaxation practices are easy to use, free and safe. With practice over time, you can master these skills and use them on a regular basis to cope with stress. By doing this, many people find that their symptoms cause them less discomfort. Some people use relaxation techniques once a day, some twice a day and some a few times each week. They seem to work best when they’re used on a regular basis, but they are also helpful if you need to calm yourself in the middle of a difficult day.

Relaxation techniques include guided visual imagery, muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, self massage and positive thinking.

Guided visual imagery is a simple relaxation method that can help you quickly and easily calm your mind and relax tension in your body. It’s a bit like enjoying a vivid, relaxing and beautiful daydream. With practice over time, guided visual imagery can help you find a state of inner peace.

Muscle relaxation is a great technique for reducing overall body tension. Many people find that anxiety and stress lead to muscle tension, often in the neck, head and back. That muscle tension can cause pains in the head, neck, jaws or back. As you practice slowly tensing and relaxing all the muscles in your body one at a time, you can learn to quickly relax your whole body. The more regularly you practice this technique, the easier and faster it will be to physically relax your body. As you lessen the tension in your body, your whole being will feel less stress and you will enjoy increased physical and emotional health.

Deep breathing is one of the best, simplest and most discreet ways to lower stress in the body. As you practice slow, deep breathing, your heart beats more slowly, your blood pressure drops and your body produces less of the stress hormone. The way you breathe affects your whole body. Focusing our attention on slow, deep abdominal breathing is a good way to relax, reduce tension, and relieve stress.

Self massage is another easy way to improve health and well-being. Tension headaches, trouble falling asleep, aches, pains, and stress can all be relieved by giving
yourself a slow, gentle massage. This can improve circulation, relax muscles and produce a feeling of well-being.

Positive thinking helps you look at the positive side of situations and have better feelings about yourself and your life. It is not a way to ignore problems or upsetting thoughts. Rather, it’s a way to encourage yourself to manage stress based on a realistic view of yourself and the situation you’re in. People who think positively are more optimistic and tend to be happier because they deal better with stress.

What calms one person may not help another. Each person’s response is unique, so it’s important to find a relaxation method that feels good to you and practice it regularly. When you need to use your method at a stressful time, the best way is to use it when you first notice you’re starting to feel stressed out: that is, before a bad situation becomes a crisis.

If you would like to learn more, or if you would like to start making relaxation exercises a part of your daily routine, here are some resources that can help:


**CD:** *Inner Peace for Busy People: Music to Relax and Renew* by Joan Borysenko, & Don Campbell

**Local supplies:** Scented lotions can be brought at most large drug stores and health food stores

**Website:** [http://nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov)

This information is brief and general. It should not be the only source of your information on this health care topic. It is not to be used or relied on for diagnosis or treatment. It does not take the place of instructions from your doctor. Talk to your health care providers before making a health care decision.

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