Easy Relaxation Techniques

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Breathing
One of the best stress reducers and calming techniques available to each of us is something we do 24 hours a day without thinking about it – breathe! However, the key to breathing as a means of decreasing stress and improving performance is intentional breathing. Breathing with purpose allows you to become centered and focused, and allows you to experience the timeless present moment. Intentional breathing improves blood flow, decreases your heart rate and blood pressure, and therefore, increases life-saving circulation of oxygen to all your cells. This, in turn, creates an environment for self-healing.

Here are some techniques for proper breathing:
1. Find a relaxing environment, if possible, and sit comfortably with your eyes closed. Make sure all extremities are uncrossed. Sit up straight enough to give your diaphragm room to expand.
2. Pay attention to the rhythm of your natural breathing, and tell yourself to “let go of all thoughts and feelings for now.”
3. Inhale through your nose to the count of four, hold your breath for a moment, and then exhale slowly through pursed lips to the count of four. Breathing should be slow, deep and regular.
4. Repeat this exercise several times until you begin to feel yourself “letting go.” You may feel a slight tingling or warmth in your hands and feet – a sign that there is increased blood flow to your extremities. It only takes 3 or 4 deep breaths like this to return your body to a state of calm.

Progressive Relaxation
Relaxation techniques that focus on progressing through successive muscle groups during a relaxation exercise are called progressive relaxation exercises. Progressive relaxation is accompanied by breathing exercises such as the one outlined above. There are two basic styles of progressive relaxation:

- Active/passive relaxation – Alternate between tensing muscles (while inhaling) and releasing muscle tension (while exhaling and saying, “let go” to yourself). The purpose of this technique is to create awareness of where you tend to carry the most tension in your body, and also to progressively train your mind and body to “let go” of tension. Each time you exhale, become even more relaxed.
- Passive relaxation – Concentrate on a specific muscle group and inhale using the breathing technique above. Hold your breath and think to yourself, for example, “feet let go,” or “hands let go,” depending on the muscle group you are focused on. Then exhale slowly using the technique above. This is good for people who have joint or connective tissue problems, or for people who are so tense they need to concentrate on being passive in order for the progressive relaxation exercise to work. Each time you exhale, become even more relaxed.

Go through the muscle groups in the following sequence, either from head down, or the feet up:

1. Forehead and eyes
2. Jaw-chin-cheeks
3. Neck
4. Shoulders
5. Upper arms
6. Lower arms
7. Chest
8. Stomach/Abdomen
9. Upper back
10. Lower back
11. Hips/buttocks
12. Thighs
13. Lower legs
14. Feet
Body Scan (5 minute maximum)

1. This is a good technique to use shortly before competition/performance begins, or before practicing visualization of a performance.
2. Sit comfortably with your eyes closed. You are going to scan your body starting at your head and going down to your toes to see if there is any tension. As you do this, breathe slowly and deeply. Keep the pattern regular. Every time you exhale, become even more relaxed. As you look at each muscle group, check to see if there is any tension. If there is, just let it go. For example, check your forehead and eyes. If you feel any tension, release it. Say, “forehead let go,” or “eyes let go.” As you progress through the muscle groups, periodically recheck your breathing to make sure it is slow, deep and regular – relaxing even more with each exhalation. Go through the muscle groups in the sequence listed above.
3. When you are finished, quickly rescan your body starting at the head and working down to the feet. Wherever you spot tension, just release it.

Quick Body Scan (10-20 seconds)

- This is a good technique to use just before or during a performance, e.g., just before a meeting, important event, going on stage, an athletic competition or during an event when you are under pressure to perform well. The Quick Body Scan can also be used before a visualization exercise.
- Quickly scan your body in the same sequence as the 5-minute body scan (head to feet). Release the tension and continue to scan down the body.

Neck/Shoulder Check

- Works best just before or during a performance.
- Many people carry excessive tension in the neck and shoulders.
- If you feel tension in your shoulders, slump your shoulders.

Stroebel’s Quieting Response

- This exercise works best during a performance. The relaxation response has 6 steps and takes only 10-15 seconds.
- One way to face a really tough, intimidating situation or opponent is with a grin. This is the foundation of Stroebel’s Quieting Response. It is difficult to be “up tight” when you’re smiling. When you feel excessive muscular tension or feel as if things are starting to affect you negatively, go through the following 6 steps:
  1. Smile
  2. Think, “Leave my body out of this.”
  3. Relax your jaw and shoulders.
  4. Take a deep belly breath (inhale through your nose) and hold it.
  5. Slowly exhale through your mouth and feel a wave of warmth and heaviness flowing down through your body into your hands and feet.
  6. Think, “I am calm” after exhaling.

Resources for Body Scan, Quick Body Scan, Neck/Shoulder Check and Stroebel’s Quieting Response from J.M. Williams, Ph.D.