

## Relaxation and Relaxation Exercises

When we are under stress the body goes into survival mode. It produces stress hormones, which gear us up to respond to perceived danger. This has come to be known as the “fight or flight” response. In that state, the heart rate increases, respiration becomes rapid and shallow, there is a rise in blood pressure, and the brain itself moves into a primitive “survival” mode, suppressing normal thought functions (evaluation, planning, deciding, encoding memory normally, etc.). The result of this is that we react rather than being able to evaluate and plan a response to the stressor. Under certain circumstances, the body may be in a constant state of “fight or flight,” which is exhausting and can contribute to the development of physical stress-related disorders, such as cardiac problems, chronic high blood pressure, and increased risk of stroke.

### Tips for relaxation

Find a quiet space where you won't be interrupted for at least 30 minutes. Turn the lights down if you like. It's helpful to wear loose, comfortable clothing. If there is unavoidable noise, it may help to put on some background music or a tape of natural sounds. Turn off the phone and give yourself permission to devote some time to self-care.

You may sit or lie down for relaxation. If you sit in a chair, it's preferable to have your spine straight and supported by the chair back. If you lie down, you may want your back flat, and legs straight. It's preferable to have your legs uncrossed, extended, so you can feel the flow of energy. These are all just suggestions, however; the most important thing is that you feel comfortable and free to position yourself as you need.

Research shows that relaxing the body will relax the mind, and vice versa. If you struggle with racing, obsessive or intrusive thoughts, it might help to focus on the body. If you have a lot of physical tension or pain, it may be better to work on relaxing the mind. It's hard to predict which exercise will work for whom; it's best to try different relaxation exercises until you find the one that feels right. Remember that you are practicing a skill – like playing the piano. The more you practice, the more effective your relaxation work becomes.

It is important to work toward an attitude of acceptance of whatever occurs in your session, rather than growing impatient if you don't achieve a given result. You are just exploring the sensations or images you choose to focus on, and noticing what happens physically, emotionally and mentally. This “mindful” approach will pay off, and you will eventually be able to experience a state shift – that is a deep, peaceful state of relaxation. As you get better and better at the mindful self-observation, you will be able to use it all the time, to notice what is going on in your body, to notice your emotions, and to pay attention to the thoughts that may be contributing to your emotional distress.

It is helpful to start out each relaxation exercise by doing a simple check in of your emotional state, your thoughts, and what you are feeling in your body. Just notice what is happening, without judgment or expectation.