

Training to Relax

by Jeffrey Noethe

Stress is a natural part of life, but excessive stress can interfere with health and productivity. In our world, daily stressors are rarely life-threatening, but our bodies often react as if they are. This 'fight-or-flight' response produces increased blood pressure, muscle tension, rapid pulse, and quick, shallow breathing. It also has effects such as poor concentration and emotional agitation. Such reactions are fine when facing a bear, but not when facing an exam. If this tension becomes a constant presence over time, it can lead to headaches, high blood pressure, ulcers, and heart problems.

Fortunately, we can train our bodies not to overreact to modern stressors. The easiest way to begin is to change physical responses, especially breathing and muscle tension. If we can learn to relax physically, we can often 'trick' the body into replacing the entire fight-or-flight response with a relaxation response. There is a myth that stress is a better motivator than relaxation, but relaxation actually allows us to use our energy more productively by not wasting it on tension and worry.

Deep breathing is the most basic way to stimulate relaxation. Unfortunately, most people are 'backward breathers'. They 'suck in' their stomachs when inhaling, which prevents a full, deep breath and contributes to stress. Deep breathing is quite simple to learn.

1. Sit or stand with good posture, and place your hand on your stomach.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply through the nose, and feel your stomach expanding.
3. When your lungs are as full as possible, hold your breath for a few seconds.
4. Exhale very slowly through the mouth until your lungs feel completely empty. Your stomach should 'deflate' as you exhale.
5. Repeat the cycle at least 3 or 4 times, slowing the breath each time. Over time, deep breathing can be slowed to 4 or 5 breaths per minute.

For many people, muscle tension becomes so normal that they forget how relaxation feels. Progressive muscle relaxation is a simple technique that can help us become more aware of the tension held in our bodies.

1. Pick a part of the body and tense the muscles in that area. Notice how it feels.
2. Release the tension completely, and notice how that feels.
3. Focus on feeling the difference between the two conditions.
4. Move on to another part of the body and repeat the process. Try to cover the whole body, especially areas that often hold a lot of stress: neck, shoulders, jaw, brow, etc.. Moving slowly from head-to-toe or toe-to-head works nicely.

By practicing these techniques a few times a day, they will slowly become natural and automatic. Even long-term 'backward breathing' habits can be broken. For the first month of practice, reminders may be useful. An hourly chime on a watch is just one example. Every time you hear the beep, no matter where you are, take 4 deep breaths and relax the muscles in a few areas of the body. Eventually, the reminders will not be necessary, and you will have taken a good first step toward stress management.

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