

# Stopping to Breathe: Relaxation Techniques



In today's world, relaxation may seem like an unnecessary luxury – something to think about in between work, family, friends, and more work. However, without taking the time to relax, you can severely endanger your health. Continual, unmanaged stress can lead to heart disease, high blood pressure and obesity among other health concerns. And in the short-term can cause headaches, lack of productivity, irritability, and restlessness. It's important, then, that you find time every day – even if only for five minutes – to relax your body and put a handle on your stress.

Here are a few techniques you can use to get started:

## CONTROLLED BREATHING

While it may seem simple if not inane, focused breathing can go a long way to calm your body and mind. There is, after all, a reason that it is the focus of practices such as yoga and remains the most highly touted relaxation technique to date. For controlled breathing:

1. Sit or lie comfortably in a calm, quiet place (once you get the hang of controlled breathing, you'll be able to do it anywhere and in any position).

2. Slowly inhale through your nose.
3. Hold your breath for a few seconds.
4. Exhale through your mouth.
5. Inhale again, this time counting to four as you do.
6. Hold your breath for a few seconds.
7. Exhale, counting to six.
8. Repeat steps 5 through 7, focusing on your breath and the counting while letting your body relax away from your stressors.

## VISUALIZATION

Some people have difficulty quieting their mind long enough to focus solely on breathing and counting. If you're one of them (or even if you aren't), try visualization. Visualization asks you to picture a relaxing environment and you in it. It's a detailed exercise, calling on you to not only visualize a place but to sense it as well. Here's an example using a mountaintop:

1. Sit comfortably in a calm, quiet place (as with breathing the location and position can change once you've become a pro)
2. Imagine you are sitting on top of a mountain. Take in the scenery around you – the trees, wildlife, shrubs, skyline and world below.

3. Imagine the sounds around you – the rustling leaves as the breeze blows against them, the tweeting of birds in the sky, bubbling of water as it flows in the background.
4. Feel the sun beaming onto your face, the breeze cooling the sun's effects, mussing your hair ever so slightly.

Such a process can be repeated using any setting; just remember to incorporate the sights, sounds, feelings, and smells of the location for full visualization.

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

The idea behind progressive muscle relaxation is that your body may not know the difference between tense and relaxed. If that's the case, how can you possibly relax? You can't. Therefore, in order to achieve full body zen, you must first tense then release. Here's how:

1. Lay comfortably on the floor, your bed, or any other available surface.
2. Tense your toes, hold for 5 seconds.
3. Relax your toes, hold for 30 seconds.
4. Moving up your body, tense your foot, hold for 5 seconds
5. Relax your foot, hold for 30 seconds.
6. Tense your calves, hold for 5 seconds.
7. Relax your calves, hold for 30 seconds.
8. Repeat tensing and relaxing with each part of your body, moving upward and finishing with your head and neck (you may reverse this and begin with your head, working your way down to your toes).

These are just three of the many ways that you can relax. Some other ways involve nothing more than a hot cup of tea or luxurious bubble bath, while others ask for considerably more of your time and relaxed energy. Find what works for you; just make sure that you find something. Your health – physical and mental – as well as those around you will be eternally grateful. ■

## Information for this patient handout was retrieved from:

- The Mayo Clinic, "Relaxation Techniques," <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/relaxation-technique/SR00007>
- WebMD, "Blissing Out," <http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/features/blissing-out-10-relaxation-techniques-reduce-stress-spot>
- University of Maryland Medical System, "Relaxation Techniques," [http://www.umm.edu/sleep/relax\\_tech.htm](http://www.umm.edu/sleep/relax_tech.htm)