Take a Deep Breath & Relax

When you’re under stress, your muscles tense and your breathing becomes shallow and rapid. One of the simplest (and best) ways to stop this stress response is to breathe deeply and slowly. It sounds simple, and it is. Most people, however, don’t breathe deeply under normal circumstances, so it may help to review the mechanics of deep breathing and how it helps you relax.

Breathing Under Stress

When prehistoric humans were in danger of attack, their muscles tensed and their breathing became rapid and shallow as they prepared to run or fight. Their high level of tension was a means of preparing their bodies for optimum performance. Today, the causes of our “stress” are different, but our stress response is the same. However, since we’re not running or fighting, our tension has no release and our stress response builds. One way to counteract the stress response is to learn how to breathe deeply and slowly—the opposite of how we breathe when under stress.

How Deep Breathing Works

Deep breathing is not always natural to adults. Watch the way a baby breathes: the area beneath the chest goes in and out. Most adults breathe from the chest. This is shallower breathing, so less oxygen is taken in with each breath. As a result, the blood is forced to move through the system quickly so that enough oxygen gets to the brain and organs. Higher blood pressure results.

Deep breathing can reverse these effects. Take some time to practice this kind of breathing each day, especially when you’re under stress. You can be sitting, standing, or lying down, but it helps to wear loose, comfortable clothing. Begin by breathing in through your nostrils. Count to four, hold the breath for a count of 7, and exhale through the mouth for a count of eight. Do this 1-3 times when under stress. You can increase your relaxation if you imagine breathing in ocean air, the scent of flowers, or forest air.

Effects of Deep Breathing

By helping you let go of tension, deep breathing can relieve headaches, back aches, stomach aches, and sleeplessness. It releases the body’s own painkillers, called endorphins, into the system. It allows blood pressure to return to normal, which is good for your heart. Deep breathing can also allow held-in emotions to come to the surface, so your emotional health benefits from deep breathing too. Use deep breathing anytime, anywhere. It’s one of the best techniques for relieving stress.
Visualization

Here’s an easy stress management technique that you can use anywhere. Visualization is a kind of “guided daydreaming” to help you relax when stress is getting the better of you. It takes only two or three minutes, though you may want to get ready for it by doing another relaxation exercise such as deep breathing before you begin.

Create Your Daydream

Here’s what you do: picture a scene in which you’re perfectly relaxed. Perhaps you’re lying on the grass on a warm spring day. Continue to visualize this scene, noticing the warmth or the sun, the breeze in the treetops, the sound of a bird singing. Keep doing this, focusing on the pleasant details of the scene until you feel as relaxed as though you are actually lying in the grass. Naturally, if you don’t enjoy lying in the grass you’ll visualize a different scene. Here are some sample visualizations:

1. It’s a warm day. You’re lying on your back on your raft, drifting in the shade of the trees along the shore. You trail your fingers in the cool water, relaxing completely, just rocking gently on the water and watching tiny fluffy clouds drift across the sky. It’s very comfortable. You lie there as long as you want, just feeling relaxed...

2. You’re sitting by a crackling fire, wrapped in soft blankets. Outside a cold rain falls, but here there’s only the sound of the fire and the flicker of the flames. You feel the warmth on your face, how it relaxes and soothes all your muscles. A log falls, sending up a shower of sparks. You sigh and stretch, feeling so comfortable, calm, and relaxed...

Now You Try One!

Give Yourself Permission

Sometimes visualization is difficult at first. Perhaps there’s an inner voice telling you that daydreaming is unproductive and a waste of time. But some mental time out is important for your health. Many of our most creative ideas arise during daydreaming. Give yourself permission to visualize, and with practice it will become natural and relaxing.
Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Tense muscles are a nearly universal reaction to stress. Few of us get through a normal workday without some tension in the neck and shoulder area. Progressive muscle relaxation not only helps you relax your muscles, it also makes you more aware of when there is tension in your body and where the tension is located. Progressive muscle relaxation also helps calm other reactions to stress, such as rapid breathing and heartbeat, stomach problems and headache.

Relaxation in 20 Minutes

Allow yourself 20 minutes to do this exercise. If possible, choose a quiet place where you can lie down undisturbed. Eventually, you’ll be able to do all or part of this exercise sitting up at your workplace.

1. Relax your entire body as much as possible, allowing it to feel heavy. Take a few slow, deep breaths. Imagine the tension flowing out with each breath.
2. Now contract the muscles of your feet as you inhale. Hold the contraction briefly, then relax as you breathe out, still imagining the tension flowing out with the breath. Breathing out and relaxing should take more time than breathing in and contracting. Notice the feel of muscles as they’re contracted or relaxed.
3. Move up your body, contracting in turn the muscles of your lower legs, upper legs, buttocks and abdomen, and so on up through your body, including your arms and hands. End with your face, tensing and relaxing the muscles of your mouth, jaw, eyes, and scalp. If a muscle seems particularly tense already, repeat the contracting with that muscle group.
4. Now lie still for 5 minutes, just experiencing your relaxed muscles. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply, feeling tension flow out and relaxation get deeper and deeper with each breath (if you doze off, don’t worry—it’s just your body telling you that you need more sleep).
5. When you’re ready to get up, count backward from four to one. Though you may be groggy at first, in a few minutes you’ll feel awake and refreshed.

Make It a Habit

Done regularly, this exercise not only relaxes you, but it also trains your body to recognize and reduce muscle tension. Do it daily if possible, along with other stress-reducing techniques such as meditation and visualization. Or take time for a session whenever you begin to feel stressed out. You can do a mini-relaxation on the muscles you use in your work, such as the neck and shoulders if you sit at a desk.