

Deep breathing for stress relief

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

How to practice deep breathing

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel. So the next time you feel stressed, take a minute to slow down and breathe deeply:

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you have a hard time breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.

Progressive muscle relaxation for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation is another effective and widely used strategy for stress relief. It involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body.

With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of relief from stress.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

- Right foot
- Left foot
- Right calf
- Left calf
- Right thigh
- Left thigh
- Hips and buttocks
- Stomach
- Chest
- Back
- Right arm and hand
- Left arm and hand
- Neck and shoulders
- Face

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box to the right:

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body — legs, abdomen, back, neck, face — contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.

Mindfulness meditation for stress relief

Meditation that cultivates *mindfulness* is particularly effective at reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions. Mindfulness is the quality of being fully engaged in the present moment, without analyzing or otherwise “over-thinking” the experience. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, mindfulness meditation switches the focus to what’s happening right now.

For stress relief, try the following mindfulness meditation techniques:

Body scan – Body scanning cultivates mindfulness by focusing your attention on various parts of your body. Like progressive muscle relaxation, you start with your feet and work your way up. However, instead of tensing and relaxing your muscles, you simply focus on the way each part of your body feels without labelling the sensations as either “good” or “bad”.

Walking meditation - You don’t have to be seated or still to meditate. In walking meditation, mindfulness involves being focused on the physicality of each step — the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving, and feeling the wind against your face.

Mindful eating – If you reach for food when you’re under stress or gulp your meals down in a rush, try eating mindfully. Sit down at the table and focus your full attention on the meal (no TV, newspapers, or eating on the run). Eat slowly, taking the time to fully enjoy and concentrate on each bite.

Mindfulness meditation is not equal to zoning out. It takes effort to maintain your concentration and to bring it back to the present moment when your mind wanders or you start to drift off. But with regular practice, mindfulness meditation actually changes the brain – strengthening the areas associated with joy and relaxation, and weakening those involved in negativity and stress.

Starting a meditation practice

A quiet environment. Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.

A comfortable position. Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.

A point of focus. Pick a meaningful word or phrase and repeat it throughout your session. You may also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.

An observant, noncritical attitude. Don’t worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you’re doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don’t fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.

Guided imagery for stress relief

Visualization, or *guided imagery*, is a variation on traditional meditation that can help relieve stress. When used as a relaxation technique, guided imagery involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether a tropical beach, a favourite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own, with a therapist's help, or using an audio recording.

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel. Guided imagery works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible. For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- **See** the sun setting over the water
- **Hear** the birds singing
- **Smell** the pine trees
- **Feel** the cool water on your bare feet
- **Taste** the fresh, clean air

Yoga for stress relief

Yoga is an excellent stress relief technique. It involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. The physical and mental benefits of yoga provide a natural counterbalance to stress, and strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life.

What type of yoga is best for stress?

Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement and gentle stretching are best for stress relief. Look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners*. Power yoga, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is not the best choice. If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes or hiring a private teacher. Once you've learned the basics, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your practice as you see fit.

Tips for starting a yoga practice:

- **Consider your fitness level and any medical issues before joining a yoga class.** There are many yoga classes for different needs, such as prenatal yoga, yoga for seniors, and adaptive yoga (modified yoga for disabilities). "Hot" or Bikram yoga, which is practiced in a heated environment, might be too much if you are just starting out.
- **Look for a low-pressure environment where you can learn at your own pace.** Don't extend yourself beyond what feels comfortable, and always back off of a pose at the first sign of pain. A good teacher can show you alternate poses for ones that are too challenging for your health or fitness level.

Massage therapy for stress relief

Getting a massage provides deep relaxation, and as the muscles in your body relax, so does your overstressed mind. And you don't have to visit the spa to enjoy the benefits of massage. There are many simple self-massage techniques you can use to relax and release stress.

Self-Massage Techniques

Scalp Soother

Place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.

Easy on the Eyes

Close your eyes and place your ring fingers directly under your eyebrows, near the bridge of your nose. Slowly increase the pressure for 5-10 seconds, then gently release. Repeat 2-3 times.

Sinus Pressure Relief

Place your fingertips at the bridge of your nose. Slowly slide your fingers down your nose and across the top of your cheekbones to the outside of your eyes.

Shoulder Tension Relief

Reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

The most common type of massage is Swedish massage, a soothing technique specifically designed to relax and energize. Another common type of massage is Shiatsu, also known as acupressure. In Shiatsu massage, therapists use their fingers to manipulate the body's pressure points.

Although self-massage is good for stress relief, getting a massage from a professional massage therapist can be tremendously relaxing and more thorough than what you can do yourself. When booking a massage, try types like Swedish or Shiatsu, which promote overall relaxation. Deep tissue and sports massages are more aggressive. They often target specific areas and may leave you sore for a couple of days, making them less effective for relaxation and stress relief.