

Deep Breathing Exercises

When people are stressed their breathing is affected. The muscular floor across the abdomen (the diaphragm) and the muscles between the ribs (intercostal muscles) become rigid and do not allow the lungs to expand freely within the rib cage, so the chest feels tight. Breathing thus becomes shallower and more rapid in order to get sufficient oxygen into the body. It is analogous to trying to inflate a balloon within the confined space of a small cage. Relaxed breathing involves learning to breathe more deeply and slowly from the abdomen rather than shallow fast breaths from the upper chest. This is known as 'diaphragmatic' breathing and is the starting point for many other forms of relaxation such as yoga and Tai Chi mentioned earlier, as well as the meditation techniques described later in this chapter. It can also be combined with other elements such as aromatherapy and relaxing music. An example of a deep breathing exercise which you can practise to help you relax is outlined below.

A deep breathing exercise

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight. Check your breathing by placing one hand on your upper chest and the other on the top of your stomach. If your breathing is correct, when you breathe in, your stomach and lower ribs should move out before your chest, which should move very little. If this is not the case, you need to learn how to breathe correctly.
2. Breathe out through your mouth, pushing out as much air as possible while at the same time contracting your abdominal muscles. Try to do this in a slow and controlled way rather than a sudden exhale. One way of doing this is to imagine that you have a lighted candle 6 inches away from your mouth, that you do not want to blow out. This will ensure that you release the air from your lungs slowly.
3. Breathe in through your nose slowly counting to 3 or 4 seconds as you breathe in, taking the air right down into your lungs. Notice the hand on your abdomen moving out as your lungs expand fully. Hold the air in for 3 or 4 seconds.
4. Continue to breathe in slowly through your nose, holding the air in and then exhaling slowly through your mouth. Notice the lower abdomen rising and falling as you do this. If you are breathing correctly, the hand on your chest will move very little.
5. If you find it difficult to breathe from your abdomen while sitting up, try doing the exercises while lying on the floor.

Progressive muscular relaxation

Progressive muscular relaxation training teaches the individual to develop advanced muscular skills which allow them to recognize and release even small amounts of tension. With regular practice the individual develops an intimate familiarity with what tension as well as complete relaxation feels like in different parts of the body and how to achieve deep levels of muscular relaxation. Also there is thought to be a powerful feedback loop between the muscles in the body and mental activity in the brain. It has been found that when a person's muscles are relaxed they are also more likely to report feeling calmer mentally. There are different types of muscular relaxation techniques but the one which is most commonly used is the 'contrast' technique. This involves learning a series of step-by-step muscle tensing and releasing exercises in different muscles groups in the body. The aim of these exercises is to teach the individual the difference between the feeling of

tension and relaxation in each group of muscles around the body. So, ultimately, with lots of practice the individual learns to be able to spot and counteract the first signs of muscular tension that accompany stress and can relax these muscles at will.

Most progressive relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the head and follow a sequence of muscle groups as they progress through the body. Learning this skill takes practice and in order to learn relaxation techniques properly you will need to set aside about 20 minutes a day to go through the exercises. If you do not make this level of commitment on a daily basis, you are unlikely to gain benefit from the training. There is a range of CDs on the market that can help you learn the techniques which are outlined below. It is important that you do the training only when there is no immediate time pressure.

For example, it is no good trying to fit it in 15 minutes before you rush off to work. This is likely to lead to skipping steps in the process or having your mind on other things rather than relaxation and ultimately experiencing the training as ineffective.

Once you have decided on the best time of day to do the relaxation training, prepare yourself by creating the right environment. Start by finding a room which is quiet and where you are unlikely to be disturbed. If necessary, inform others in the house that you are doing the exercises and do not wish to be disturbed. You do not want the distraction of someone walking into the room to get something or telling you there is a telephone call for you halfway through the exercises. Also, make sure that the room is not too hot or too cold and the lighting is dimmed if possible. You may need to close the curtains if it is too bright. Make yourself comfortable by either lying on a bed or sitting in a comfortable armchair. Loosen any tight clothing such as a belt, tie or the top button of a shirt. Take off your shoes and get yourself comfortable. Take a few minutes to concentrate on your breathing using the breathing exercises described earlier. Once you are breathing in and out in slow deep breaths, you are ready to start the progressive muscular relaxation routine outlined below.

A progressive muscular relaxation exercise

1. Focus your attention to your right foot, squeezing it as tightly as possible to the count often.
2. Relax your right foot. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation in the muscles of your right foot. Enjoy the feeling of your foot loosening up and the feeling of warmth as the blood returns to the muscles in the foot. Wiggle your toes around gently and notice the cooler air circulating around them.
3. Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
4. Shift your attention to the left foot and repeat the exercise.
5. Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
6. Move slowly up through your body contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go — right calf, left calf, right thigh, left thigh, hips and buttocks, stomach, chest, back, right arm and hand, left arm and hand, neck, shoulders, face, eyes and head.
7. Periodically return to your breathing to ensure that you are breathing slow, deep breaths.
8. Once you have gone through the full routine, spend a few minutes simply enjoying the relaxed state that you are in before returning to your everyday tasks.
9. Repeat this exercise daily until you feel that you have fully mastered the techniques involved.

10. If you notice that the tension is worse in particular muscle groups in the body, tailor the exercise routine to spend extra time on these muscle groups and less on those where it is not such a problem.
11. Once you have learned and are comfortable with the relaxation exercises, you can then begin to use them to combat stress in real life situations, for example when you are stuck in your car in a traffic jam or during your coffee break at work.

A brief relaxation exercise for the neck and shoulders

For many people who are stressed, muscular neck and shoulder muscles. Below is a relaxation very little time to do and specifically focuses It consists of exercises aimed at adopting the shoulders and relaxing the neck muscles.

1. *Find the correct sitting position:* stand up straight with your arms at your sides about six inches in front of a chair. Move the left leg back so that the back of the knee touches the chair. In one swift movement stick your bottom out and sit back in the chair. Allow yourself to slide into position in the chair with both feet flat on the ground and your back straight.
2. *Neck rotation:* sitting in an upright position looking straight ahead of you, slowly rotate your head to the left until your chin is parallel to your left shoulder. Hold your head there to the count of ten before slowly returning your head to look straight ahead of you. Repeat the exercise, moving your head to the right. Go through the full routine a few times.
3. *Neck elongation:* imagine that you are a puppet with a string attached to the top of your head and someone is pulling the string upwards. You will experience an 'elongation' feeling in the vertebrae (bones) of the spine in your neck. Do not resist this but simply allow it to happen for a count often. Then relax and notice a 'sinking' feeling as you relax. Repeat the exercise again after a 30 second gap. When repeated, the action should feel like there is a 'spring' in your neck.
4. *Shoulder exercises:* slowly and gently hunch your shoulders up tightly and move them upwards as if you are trying to touch your ears with them. Hold the position for the count often and then relax your shoulders. Repeat the exercise a couple of times.

Note: do not do the neck and shoulder exercises more than three times in one session but do them regularly, especially when you are feeling tension in your neck.