

Relaxation and You

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Life can be filled with a lot of necessary activities that can use up much of your valuable time. "Too little time — too much to do", has become a true statement for many people. With so many activities, stress from work, and family expectations, you may start experiencing negative physical reactions.

These symptoms may include:

- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
- Lack of energy (fatigue)
- Elevated stress and anxiety levels
- Muscle pain and stiffness
- Elevated heart-rate
- Feelings that you can't slow down

The good news is that using relaxation exercises can really help you reduce some of the symptoms a stressful, busy life presents. There may be a larger benefit of relaxation in addition to relieving these symptoms. The ability to escape from your everyday stress and demands may help to increase your focus, reduce cluttered thinking, and improve your mood.

The downside of stress

According to the University of Maryland's Medical Center (2004), "When we become stressed, our bodies engage in something called the 'fight or flight' response. The fight or flight response refers to changes that occur in the body when it prepares to either fight or run. These changes include increased heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing, and a 300 to 400 percent increase in the amount of blood being pumped to the muscles. Over time, these reactions raise cholesterol levels, disturb intestinal activities, and depress the immune system. In general, they leave us feeling 'stressed out!'"

The relaxation response

There is an opposite response to the "fight or flight" theory. The concept is known as the "relaxation response". Dr. Herbert Benson first used this explanation in the 1970's. From Dr. Benson's Mind/Body Institute (2006), "The relaxation response is a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress." When this response is triggered, the human body responds by decreasing metabolism rate, lowering heart rate, and slowing breathing.

Relaxation exercise

Here is a relaxation exercise you can try. You can experiment where you want to try this.

1. Find a comfortable and quiet place where you will not be disturbed
2. Release your thoughts as they arise
3. Clear your mind
4. If possible, close your eyes
5. Let go of your concern about relaxing
6. Take notice of your breathing — breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth
7. Use the technique for ten to twenty minutes, also allowing three minutes to gradually come out of your relaxation.
8. Relax daily; a short time relaxing may be helpful in stress reduction

Brief relaxation techniques

You may not have enough time during the day to do a full relaxation exercise, or you may be in a situation where you need fast relief. For example, you may be going to a job interview and you feel the anxiety building. There is no place to spend twenty minutes to relax. Your solution may be to use a brief relaxation technique. From the article "About Relaxation" (2000), Dr. Carlos Zalaquett and Angela McCraw present some brief relaxation techniques.

- **Breathing:** This is one of the simplest ways to experience relaxation. Start by breathing deeply and evenly. When you breathe, fill up your lungs with air. Release your breath slowly through your nose. As you breathe out, release the tension and worries you have. Spend five minutes breathing in and out.
- **Tense-Relax Muscles:** Tighten the muscle you want to relax. Focus on and feel the tension where you have tightened. Then let the muscle become loose and limp. Feel the relaxation flow into the muscle.
- **Body Scan:** With your mind, briefly scan every muscle in your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head. If you sense a tight muscle, just let it become limp and relaxed.
- **Mind Quieting:** To quiet your mind, first focus on your breathing. As you breathe in, say slowly to yourself "I am" and as you breathe out, say slowly to yourself "calm". When your mind feels calm you may focus only on your breathing with no thought at all.

The what, why, and how of relaxation have been discussed. It's now up to you to put a relaxation exercise to use. It may help to identify some situations in which you can use the different techniques. Test how these exercises work for you and be prepared to use them when you experience a stressful situation. And remember, practice makes perfect! If you have any questions or concerns with your stress level or want to learn more about relaxation exercises, please consult your health care professional.

References:

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