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Slide 1



**Relaxation Strategies**



**Presentation by:**  
MHN Training &  
Development



**MHN**  
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*Participant Handbook*

## Slide 2



### Learning Objectives

- Explain different relaxation techniques
- Review how they are beneficial
- Highlight how relaxation techniques work
- Experience different techniques
- Offer tips for getting started

## Slide 3



### What Are Relaxation Techniques?

Any method, procedure or activity that can help you to:

- relax
- cope with stress, pain, anxiety or anger
- promote long-term health

by:

- refocusing attention on something calming
- increasing body awareness

Slide 4

**What Are The Types of Relaxation Techniques?** 

Some of the different types of relaxation techniques include:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Meditation
  - Primordial Sound Meditation (PSM), Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Zen, Transcendental Meditation, Kundalini Yoga, etc.
- Visualization

Slide 5

**Practice Activities** 

*It's all in the breath...*

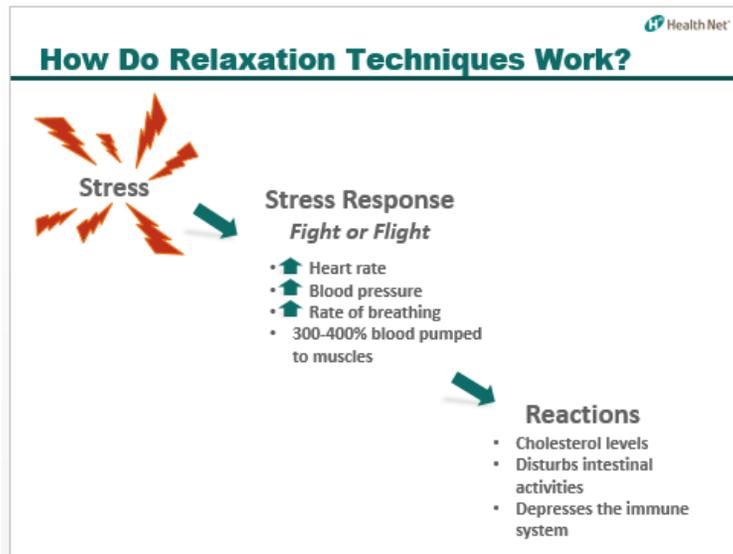
❖ Deep breathing

&

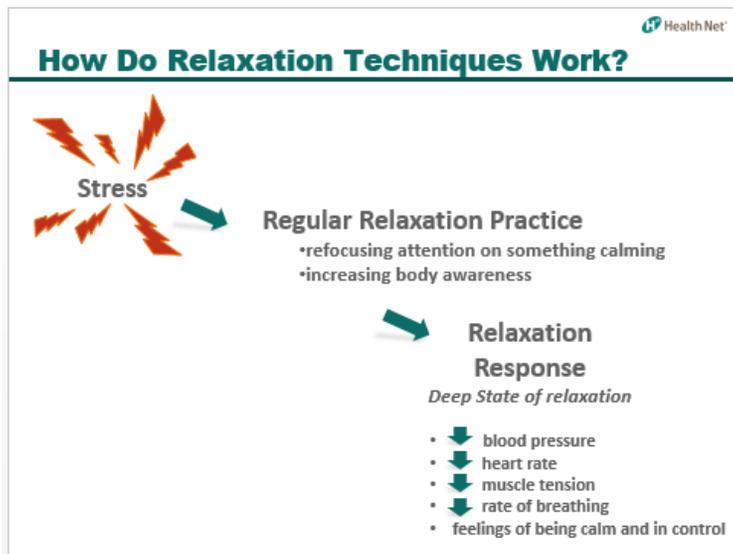
*A peaceful place...*

❖ Visualization

Slide 6



Slide 7



Slide 8

**What Are Relaxation Techniques Good For?** 

**Studies show that with consistent practice, relaxation techniques can potentially reduce symptoms or improve outcomes in the following conditions:**

|                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| Stress                   | Panic disorders  |
| Premenstrual syndrome    | Chronic tension headaches  |
| Pain                     | Fibromyalgia   |
| Irritable bowel syndrome | Insomnia   |
| Anxiety                  | Psoriasis  |
| Infertility              | Arthritis  |
| High blood pressure      | Hyperactivity in children, as in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) |
| High cholesterol         | Labor and child birth  |
| Diabetes                 |  |

Source: <http://umm.edu/health/medical/altmed/treatment/relaxation-techniques>

Slide 9

**What Are Relaxation Techniques Good For?** 

And can:

- Improve concentration and mood
- Lower fatigue
- Reduce anger and frustration
- Boost confidence to handle problems

Source: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/relaxation-technique/art-20045308?pg=2>

Slide 10

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**Additional Techniques**

*What are you sensing?*

- ❖ Mindfulness Meditation: The Body Scan

*Mind those muscles*

- ❖ Progressive Muscle Relaxation

*Feel the rhythm*

- ❖ Rhythmic movement, physical activity

Slide 11

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**Frequently Asked Questions**

Is there anything I should watch out for?  
Can I learn relaxation techniques by myself?  
Where can I find a class or learn more?

Slide 12



### **Tips For Getting Started**

- Choose a special place where you can sit (or lie down) comfortably and quietly
- Don't try too hard. That may just cause you to tense up.
- Don't be too passive, either. The key to eliciting the relaxation response lies in shifting your focus from stressors to deeper, calmer rhythms.
- Try to practice once or twice a day, always at the same time, in order to enhance the sense of ritual and establish a habit.
- Try to practice at least 10–20 minutes each day.

Slide 13



### **Relaxation Techniques Take Practice**

- Be patient with yourself.
- Don't let your effort to practice become yet another stressor.
- If one relaxation technique doesn't work for you, try another. If none of your efforts at stress reduction seems to work, talk to your doctor about other options.
- If you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your doctor or mental health provider.

Slide 14

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### Other Techniques To Consider

- Hypnosis
- Massage
- Tai chi
- Yoga
- Biofeedback
- Music and art therapy

Slide 15

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### Action Plan

- What strategies help you relax and de-stress?
- Are you doing them?
- Is there a new technique that we talked about today that are you interested in trying out and possibly incorporating into your daily routine?



## Resources

Internet:

- [www.members.MHN.com](http://www.members.MHN.com)
- [www.stress.about.com](http://www.stress.about.com)
- Getting started with meditation & mindfulness practices:  
[www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)
- Videos and a guide to practicing yoga:  
<http://www.yogajournal.com/category/yoga-101/>

Books:

- The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook by Martha Davis
- Meditation for Beginners by Jack Kornfield, Ph.D
- How to Relax (Mindfulness Essentials) by Thich Nhat Hanh and Jason DeAntonis

# Handout A: Deep Breathing

There are many different ways of practicing deep breathing. The key is to slow your breathing down and to breathe 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 can feel.

Here is a simple practice that you can begin with. You may wish to experiment later with other practices.

**Note:** if you have a history of emphysema or heart disease, consult with your physician before practicing.

- Sit in a comfortable upright position.
- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. When you take a deep breath in, the hand on the abdomen should rise higher than the one on the chest. This insures that the diaphragm is pulling air into the bases of the lungs.
- After exhaling through the mouth, take a slow deep breath in through your nose, for a count of 4, imagining that you are sucking in all the air in the room and hold it for a count of 7 (or as long as you are able, not exceeding 7).
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of 8. As all the air is released with relaxation, gently contract your abdominal muscles to completely evacuate the remaining air from the lungs. It is important to remember that we deepen respirations not by inhaling more air but through completely exhaling it.
- Repeat the cycle four more times for a total of 5 deep breaths. Note: you can do it longer if you wish.

In general, exhalation should be twice as long as inhalation. The use of the hands on the chest and abdomen are only needed to help you train your breathing. Once you feel comfortable with your ability to breathe into the abdomen, they are no longer needed.

Breathing techniques can be practiced almost anywhere and can be combined with aromatherapy and music.

# Handout B: Visualization Exercise

Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up.

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine a setting that is calming and restful; whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, a quiet wooded glen or your own living room.

Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you; don't select images because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you.

If you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake, for example:

- Walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you.
- Spend some time exploring each of your senses.
- 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.

Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. Stay there as long as you wish. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present.

Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements, or even cough or yawn. Again, these are normal responses.

**Note:** You can do this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music, or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. To help you employ your hearing you can use a sound machine or download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Adapted from:

<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm>

# Handout C: Body Scan

*Where you focus your attention along your body, from the toes to the top of your head, trying to be aware and accepting of whatever you sense in these body parts, without controlling or changing those feelings.*

## **Settling Attention**

Begin by sitting comfortably for 2 minutes. Sit in a position that enables you to be both relaxed and alert at the same time, whatever that means to you.

Breathe naturally and bring very gentle attention to the breath. You can either bring attention to the nostrils, the abdomen, or the entire body of breath, whatever that means to you. Become aware of in breath, out breath, and space in between.

## **Scan Body**

### **Head**

Now bring your attention to the top of your head, ears, and back of your head. Notice sensations, or lack of sensations, for 1 minute.

### **Face**

Now move your attention to your face. Your forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose, lips, mouth, and inside of your mouth (gums, tongue) for 1 minute.

### **Necks and Shoulders**

Move your attention to your neck, the inside of your throat, and your shoulders for 1 minute.

### **Back**

Move your attention to your lower back, mid back, and upper back for 1 minute. The back carries a lot of our load and stores a lot of our tension. Give your back the kind and loving attention it so deserves.

### **Front**

Now move your attention to the chest and stomach for 1 minute. If it is possible for you, try to bring attention to your internal organs, whatever that means to you.

### **Entire Body at Once**

And now, bring your attention to your entire body all at once for 1 minute.

### **Scan for Emotion**

Did you find any emotion in your body? If there is any, just notice its presence in the body. If not, just notice the absence of emotions, and catch one if it arises in the next 2 minutes.

### **Positive Emotion**

Try to experience a positive emotion in the body.

Bring to mind a memory of a happy, joyous event or a time when you were optimal and productive or a time when you felt confident.

Experience the feeling of positive emotion. Now, bring your attention to your body. What does that positive emotion feel like in the body? In the face? Neck, chest, back? How are you breathing? Any difference in the level of tension? Let yourself experience it for 3 minutes.

### **Returning to Grounding**

Now return to the present. If you find an emotionally charged thought, just let it go.

Bring your attention to either your body or your breath, whichever your mind finds more stability in. And let's just settle the mind there for 2 minutes.

Adapted from: Tan, Chade-Meng. *Search Inside Yourself*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012

# Handout D: Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process. First, you systematically tense particular muscle groups in your body, such as your neck and shoulders. Next, you release the tension and notice how your muscles feel when you relax them.

Through practice you can learn to distinguish between the feelings of a tensed muscle and a completely relaxed muscle. Then, you can begin to “cue” this relaxed state at the first sign of the muscle tension that accompanies your feelings of anxiety. By tensing and releasing, you learn not only what relaxation feels like, but also to recognize when you are starting to get tense during the day.

## HELPFUL HINTS:

- Set aside about 15 minutes to complete this exercise.
- Find a place where you can complete this exercise without being disturbed.
- For the first week or two, practice this exercise twice a day until you get the hang of it. The better you become at it, the quicker the relaxation response will “kick in” when you really need it!
- You do not need to be feeling anxious when you practice this exercise. In fact, it is better to first practice it when you are calm. That way, it will be easier to do when feeling anxious.

## Getting ready

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit, then close your eyes and let your body go loose. A reclining armchair is ideal. You can lie down, but this will increase your chances of falling asleep. Although relaxing before bed can improve your sleep, the goal of this exercise is to learn to relax while awake. Wear loose, comfortable clothing, and don’t forget to remove your shoes. Take about five slow, deep breaths before you begin.

## How to Do It

### STEP ONE: Tension

The first step is applying muscle tension to a specific part of the body. This step is essentially the same regardless of which muscle group you are targeting. First, focus on the target muscle group, for example, your left hand. Next, take a slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds. It is important to *really feel* the tension in the muscles, which may even cause a bit of discomfort or shaking. In this instance, you would be making a tight fist with your left hand.

It is easy to accidentally tense other surrounding muscles (for example, the shoulder or arm), so try to **ONLY** tense the muscles you are targeting. Isolating muscle groups gets easier with practice.

**Be Careful!** Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while completing this exercise. Make the muscle tension deliberate, yet

gentle. If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones, or any medical issues that would hinder physical activity, consult your doctor first.

#### **STEP TWO:** Relaxing the Tense Muscles

This step involves quickly relaxing the tensed muscles. After about 5 seconds, let all the tightness flow out of the tensed muscles. Exhale as you do this step. You should feel the muscles become loose and limp, as the tension flows out. **It is important to very deliberately focus on and notice the difference between the tension and relaxation. This is the most important part of the whole exercise.**

Remain in this relaxed state for about 15 seconds, and then move on to the next muscle group. Repeat the tension-relaxation steps. After completing all of the muscle groups, take some time to enjoy the deep state of relaxation.

**Note:** It can take time to learn to relax the body and notice the difference between tension and relaxation. At first, it can feel uncomfortable to be focusing on your body, but this can become quite enjoyable over time.

#### The Different Muscle Groups

During this exercise, you will be working with almost all the major muscle groups in your body. To make it easier to remember, start with your feet and systematically move up (or if you prefer, you can do it in the reverse order, from your forehead down to your feet).

For example:

**Foot** (curl your toes downward)

**Lower leg and foot** (tighten your calf muscle by pulling toes towards you)

**Entire leg** (squeeze thigh muscles while doing above)

*(Repeat on other side of body)*

**Hand** (clench your fist)

**Entire right arm** (tighten your biceps by drawing your forearm up towards your shoulder and “make a muscle”, while clenching fist)

*(Repeat on other side of body)*

**Buttocks** (tighten by pulling your buttocks together)

**Stomach** (suck your stomach in)

**Chest** (tighten by taking a deep breath)

**Neck and shoulders** (raise your shoulders up to touch your ears)

**Mouth** (open your mouth wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw)

**Eyes** (clench your eyelids tightly shut)

### **Fore**

It can be helpful to listen to someone guide you through these steps. There are many relaxation CDs for sale that will take you through a progressive muscle relaxation (or something very similar). Alternatively, you can record a script of this process on a tape or CD, or ask a friend or relative with a calm, soothing voice to record it for you. It would sound something like this:

*Take a deep breath in through your nose...hold your breath for a few seconds...and now breathe out...take another deep breath through your nose... Now pay attention to your body and how it feels.... Start with your **right foot**... squeeze all the muscles in your right foot. Curl your toes as tight as you can, now hold it....hold it...good...now relax and exhale...let your foot go limp...notice the difference between the tension and relaxation....feel the tension flow out of your foot like water...(then repeat with **right lower leg and foot, entire right leg**, etc...)*

### Quick Tense & Relax!

Once you have become familiar with the “tension and relaxation” technique, and have been practicing it for a couple weeks, you can begin to practice a very short version of progressive muscle relaxation. In this approach, you learn how to tense larger groups of muscles, which takes even less time. These muscle groups are:

1. Lower limbs (feet and legs)
2. Stomach and chest
3. Arms, shoulders, and neck
4. Face

So instead of working with just one specific muscle group at a time (e.g., your stomach), you can focus on the complete group (your stomach AND chest). You can start by focusing on your breathing during the tension and relaxation. When doing this shortened version, it can be helpful to say a certain word or phrase to yourself as you slowly exhale (such as “*relax*”, “*let go*”, “*stay calm*”, “*peace*” “*it will pass*” etc...). This word or phrase will become associated with a relaxed state; eventually, saying this word alone can bring on a calm feeling. This can be handy during times when it would be hard to take the time to go through all the steps of progressive muscle relaxation.

### Release Only

A good way to even further shorten the time you take to relax your muscles is to become familiar with the “release only” technique. One of the benefits of tensing and releasing muscles is that you learn to recognize what tense muscles feel like and what relaxed muscles feel like.

Once you feel comfortable with the tension and relaxation techniques, you can start doing “release only”, which involves **removing** the “tension” part of the exercise.

For example, instead of tensing your stomach and chest before relaxing them, try just relaxing the muscles. At first, the feeling of relaxation might feel less intense than when you tensed the muscles beforehand, but with practice, the release-only technique can be just as relaxing.

**Final Note:** Remember to practice progressive muscle relaxation often, whether you are feeling anxious or not. This will make the exercise even more effective when you really do need to relax! Though it may feel a bit tedious at first, ultimately you will gain a skill that will probably become a very important part of managing your anxiety in your daily life

Source: Adapted from <http://www.anxietybc.com/adults/how-do-progressive-muscle-relaxation>, 2/9/16.

# Handout E: Other Techniques to Consider

## Yoga

Yoga involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as reducing anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. Practiced regularly, it can also strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life. Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher, or at least following video instructions.

### What type of yoga is best for stress?

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Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing, and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

- **Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga. It features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation, making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone primarily looking for stress reduction.
- **Hatha yoga** is also a reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class.
- **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

## Tai chi

If you've ever seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you've probably witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced, non-competitive series of slow, flowing body movements. These movements emphasize concentration, relaxation, and the conscious circulation of vital energy throughout the body. Though tai chi has its roots in martial arts, today it is primarily practiced as a way of calming the mind, conditioning the body, and reducing stress. As in meditation, tai chi practitioners focus on their breathing and keeping their attention in the present moment.

Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and fitness levels, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. Like yoga, once you've learned the basics of tai chi or qi gong, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your sessions as you see fit.

## Massage therapy

You're probably already aware how much a professional massage at a spa or health club can help reduce stress, relieve pain, and ease muscle tension. What you may not be aware of is that you can experience many of the same benefits at home or work by practicing self-massage—or trading massages with a loved one.

Try taking a few minutes to massage yourself at your desk between tasks, on the couch at the end of a hectic day, or in bed to help you unwind before sleep. To enhance relaxation, you can use aromatic oil, scented lotion, or combine self-massage with mindfulness or deep breathing techniques.

A five-minute self-massage to relieve stress works well to relieve muscle tension. Try gentle chops with the edge of your hands or tapping with fingers or cupped palms. Put fingertip pressure on muscle knots. Knead across muscles, and try long, light, gliding strokes. You can apply these strokes to any part of the body that falls easily within your reach. For a short session like this, try focusing on your neck and head:

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- Start by kneading the muscles at the back of your neck and shoulders. Make a loose fist and drum swiftly up and down the sides and back of your neck. Next, use your thumbs to work tiny circles around the base of your skull. Slowly massage the rest of your scalp with your fingertips. Then tap your fingers against your scalp, moving from the front to the back and then over the sides.
  - Now massage your face. Make a series of tiny circles with your thumbs or fingertips. Pay particular attention to your temples, forehead, and jaw muscles. Use your middle fingers to massage the bridge of your nose and work outward over your eyebrows to your temples.
  - Finally, close your eyes. Cup your hands loosely over your face and inhale and exhale easily for a short while.

Adapted from *Stress Management: Approaches for Preventing and Reducing Stress*, a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.

## Handout F: Action Plan

- 1) What strategies do you already have, that you know help you relax and de-stress?

Sometimes we have some great resources in our pocket, but we don't use them very often. Are you ready to make a commitment to yourself to incorporate one or two of those strategies into your daily routine? If so, write down what the activity is and when you will do it. Consider as well, what obstacles might surface that would make it challenging? From there – put planned actions into your schedule!

- 2) Is there a *new* technique that you haven't tried and are interested in trying out and possibly incorporating into your daily routine?

If so, write down what the activity is and when you will try it out. And again, put that into your schedule!