



Learning to Relax

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NORTHSTAR COMPASS

*Navigating
Toward Better
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THE VALUE OF ANXIETY

While anxiety is clearly undesirable, some forms of anxiety are necessary and can serve a purpose. For instance, a mother's anxiety over her newborn is common and necessary. Is the baby breathing normally? Is it getting enough milk? Is the baby warm or cool enough? These thoughts help the mother to care well for her baby.

AN EMOTIONAL WARNING SYSTEM

Like pain, some anxiety is an important emotional warning system alerting us to potential danger. Just as pain is necessary to the body, warning of disease and damage, so anxiety sends important messages of impending threat or danger to your emotional well-being. Without it, we would become emotional lepers, constantly harming ourselves by not paying attention to emotional danger.

There is a balance in how much anxiety a person should and can carry. People with no anxiety feel no guilt, are dangerous, and tend to be sociopaths. Too much anxiety can lead to avoidance, distress, panic attacks, and excessive worry, robbing one of life's joys. Anxiety can be reduced and managed through relaxation.

YOU CAN RELAX

When people are anxious, worried, angry, or frustrated, physical tension and tightness are common. Learning relaxation techniques helps people breathe slower, decreasing their need for oxygen, their heart rate and blood pressure decrease, and hyper-vigilance is reduced.

Learning to relax and reduce physical tension can also help one become less impulsive and reactive to stress, interrupt the anger cycle, make more positive choices, and increase cognitive functioning. One study followed middle school students who had been taught by their teachers to relax. The study revealed students with the relaxation

PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION SEQUENCE

This following sequence will take you from your head through your neck, shoulders, arms, hands, chest, back, stomach, hips, legs, and feet. Tense each muscle group for five to seven seconds and then relax for 20-30 seconds. Repeat twice for before moving on to the next muscle group.

- Wrinkle your forehead
- Squint your eyes tightly
- Open your mouth wide
- Push your tongue against the roof of your mouth
- Clench your jaw tightly
- Push your head back into a pillow
- Bring your head forward to touch your chest
- Roll your head to your right shoulder
- Roll your head to your left shoulder
- Shrug your shoulders up as if to touch your ears
- Shrug your right shoulder up as if to touch your ear
- Shrug your left shoulder up as if to touch your ear
- Hold your arms out and make a fist with each hand
- One side at a time, push your hands down into the surface where you are practicing
- One side at a time, make a fist, bend your arm at the elbow, and tighten up your arm while holding the fist
- Take a deep breath and hold
- Tighten your chest muscles
- Arch your back
- Tighten your stomach area
- Push your stomach area out
- Pull your stomach area in
- Tighten your hips
- Push the heels of your feet into the surface where you are practicing
- Tighten your leg muscles below the knee
- Curl your toes under as if to touch the bottoms of your feet
- Bring your toes up, as if to touch your knees

training showed greater improvement in academic scores over a two-year period. They had higher grades, better work habits, and were more cooperative. Learning relaxation techniques improved their overall problem solving abilities (Benson, et. al., 2000).

EXERCISE: DEEP BREATHING

1. Lie down on a blanket or rug on the floor. Bend your knees up toward you and move your feet until they are about eight inches apart, with your toes turned slightly outward. Keep your spine as straight as possible.
2. Scan your entire body and identify any places that hold tension.
3. Put one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest.
4. Inhale slowly through your nose into your abdomen so that it pushes your hand up; your chest should move only a little bit. Hold your breath, counting to five.
5. Smile slightly and then exhale through your mouth, taking as long as possible. Make a shushing sound as you exhale.
6. Repeat this at least five times, perhaps eventually increasing the amount of time you spend deep-breathing from five to ten times.
7. When you have finished the exercise, again scan your entire body to see if any tension remains.

Once you are familiar with this technique, you can also use it while you are sitting or standing, wherever you feel tenseness in your body.

(Adapted from Davis, Eshelman, & McKay, 2008).



GUIDELINES TO RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

1. Practice your chosen technique daily.
2. Find a quiet environment without distractions. Even background noise can be an interruption.
3. Disregard distracting, competing or counterproductive thoughts.
4. Focus on each specific muscle group, not allowing your attention to wander.
5. Remove your shoes. Wear comfortable, loose clothing.
6. Combine relaxation with an exercise routine.

THE ANXIETY PICTURE TODAY

The anxiety-related disorders we suffer from today include the following:

Existential Anxiety: fear over lack of purpose or non-being, awareness of the inevitability of death leading to concern for a meaningful life.

Fear: anxiety over real fears, threats, demands, or being overly concerned about a particular happening that may only have some basis in reality.

Generalized Anxiety: unfocused and generalized anxiety that becomes free-floating, often changing its object of concern.

Panic Anxiety: a chemical imbalance in the brain, due to a lack of natural tranquilizers, causing all systems to become hyperactive and easily panicked. Panic anxiety can lead to agoraphobia.

Phobic Anxiety: exaggerated and persistent fears, avoidance of certain places, people, or projects.

Separation Anxiety: originating with an insecure childhood, this anxiety arises when a person is cut off from home or loved ones.

Worry: excessive thinking about imagined or unlikely fears, expectation of the worst and bracing for an imagined catastrophe.

SOURCES

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This information in this publication is not intended as a substitute for professional help or to be used as a diagnostic tool. If you have serious difficulties with anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues, please seek professional help.