

Stress management: mindfulness and relaxation techniques

Mindfulness and relaxation processes can help lower the effects of stress on your mind and body.

Do you ever feel like you're under too much pressure, have too many problems to solve, too little time, and too many people judging your efforts along the way?

Stress is a natural part of life, and how we choose to manage it is critical to our wellbeing. Chronic or extreme levels of stress can negatively impact physical and mental health. The cardiovascular, endocrine, respiratory, reproductive, gastrointestinal, nervous and muscle systems can all be impacted.

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques provide ways to redirect your thoughts back toward the present moment and allow you to experience it in a nonjudgmental way.

There are many benefits to incorporating mindfulness and relaxation techniques into your life. From an emotional and physical standpoint, they may help fight depression, anxiety and other mental health symptoms. They may also help you feel better about yourself, take better care of yourself, and raise your mood. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques may also allow you to be more creative and thoughtful in your work.



Mindfulness exercises

There is no one definitive way to practice mindfulness. There are many techniques to allow the mind to connect with the present moment in a state of "focused relaxation."

- **Find a comfortable place and sit quietly.** Focus on what it feels like to breathe in and out. Relax your mind and dismiss other thoughts. If your mind does begin to wander, don't judge yourself. Gently redirect your thoughts back to the exercise. A silently repeated word or "mantra" may help.
- **Be present.** Pay attention to your body and your senses. If there is something you feel, smell or hear, allow it to happen and pass without judgement. The same goes for your emotions. Identify and name them as you experience them and, once again, allow them to happen and pass without judgment.
 - Practice being present in your relationships, at work and by yourself. Push aside thoughts about your to-do list, future events and things in the past. Try keeping your thoughts on the here and now.
 - When you find yourself experiencing urges or cravings, take note of how your body feels at that precise moment. Then, rather than vaguely hoping that the craving will pass, take a more definitive stance; this craving will pass!

Practicing mindfulness might not seem particularly relaxing at first, but in time it may expand your self-awareness, your acceptance of a wider range of experiences, and your ability to be at peace with yourself.

Types of relaxation techniques

Relaxation techniques are intentional practices used to produce the body's natural relaxation response. These skills may slow breathing and heart rates, lower blood pressure, reduce headaches, chronic pain and insomnia, improve digestion and even boost self-confidence.

These activities are tools that can improve our health and our overall quality of life if we set aside time to practice them.

- **Autogenic relaxation** — Paying attention to your body is a great way to reduce stress. People who practice this form of relaxation focus on peaceful images or words while tuning into their breathing, heart rate and physical sensations.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation** — With this technique, you slowly tense and relax individual muscles. Start with your feet and work up to your head. This practice teaches awareness of muscle tension when you are stressed.
- **Biofeedback** — There are electronic devices you can use to measure physical responses to stress. With instant feedback, you can take notes on what exercises relax you the most.
- **Guided imagery** — Begin by replacing negative images with positive, peaceful ones. For example, you might envision a day at the beach or relaxing in a hammock under the shade.
- **Music** — Believe it or not, listening to music can lower your heart rate and blood pressure. Focus on the music and sing out loud if possible.
- **Laughter** — Watching your favorite funny movie or catching up with a witty friend can be just what the doctor ordered, so to speak. Laughter lowers cortisol, your body's stress hormone, and promotes brain chemicals called endorphins to lift your mood.
- **Visualization** — Form mental images of a calming location or situation, and use your imagination to experience the sounds, smells and feel of the moment.
- **Gratitude** — There is much to say for approaching life with a positive attitude and good perspective. Focusing on (or even writing down) things we're grateful for, can have a transformative effect our entire outlook.

How to start

Consider downloading an app or searching for guided exercises online.

Different exercises work for different people, so keep trying until you find a technique that works best for you.

Mindfulness and relaxation techniques are low-cost and can be performed almost anywhere.

Regardless of where you land on the stress spectrum, from feeling overwhelmed to managing your stress well, these activities may improve your overall sense of wellbeing.



Critical support when you need it

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