



## Information for Patients, Families and Healthcare Providers

Relaxation skills use the mind-body connection to provide comfort and calm to body, mind and spirit. Relaxation skills are easy to learn and help us cope better with day to day life.

Relaxation skills are intended to enhance and complement traditional medicine, never to replace it. You should not stop taking your regular medications while using relaxation skills.

Using relaxation skills can:

- Promote self care
- Ease anxiety
- Lessen pain or fatigue
- Promote healthy body functions such as blood pressure, breathing and blood flow
- Increase beneficial hormones such as endorphins, our natural pain killers and mood elevators
- Decrease the circulation of cortisol, the stress hormone
- Honor and respect your limits
- Provide enjoyable experiences
- Improve quality time with others

Types of relaxation skills:

- Breathing exercises
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Guided imagery
- Meditation and prayer
- Physical exercise

## BREATHING EXERCISES

Deep breathing is the most basic relaxation exercise. Breathing deeply and slowly triggers the body's own natural relaxation response. Breathing exercises may be done anywhere, with no special equipment. While practicing, keep your mind focused on breathing. If any thoughts enter your mind, gently put them aside and focus again on breathing.

## Relaxation Skills: Using Mind-Body Methods for Comfort Care

Each breath should relax you more and more. With regular practice this becomes easier and works more effectively. The maximum effect from relaxing with slow, deep, rhythmic breathing can be achieved by breathing for 10 – 20 minutes every day or two.

*Belly Breathing* – Make yourself comfortable. Rest your hands on your stomach so you can feel your own breathing. Inhale deeply through the nose and feel the stomach expand as you breathe in. When you have taken in as much air as you can, breathe out through your mouth and feel your stomach flatten. Exhale completely and repeat the process. Continue breathing in and out, keeping the shoulders and chest relaxed.

*Rhythmic Breathing* – As you breathe in and out practice counting silently to the number 4 as you slowly inhale and then count to the number 4 as you exhale. Use any numbers that feel comfortable, perhaps even experimenting with inhaling to a count of 4 and exhaling to a count of 8. This is a type of extended rhythmic breathing.

## PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Muscle relaxation allows you to relieve tension in the body. When muscles relax blood flows more easily. Muscle tension can also make pain worse. There are two types of progressive muscle relaxation, choose the one that works best for you.

*Active Progressive Muscle Relaxation* – This is a process of tightening and relaxing muscle groups in the body. This can make you more aware of tension in your body and provides a way to release the tightness.

Begin by making a fist, tightening your hand muscles. Feel the tension in the hand as you hold it tightly for 5 – 7 seconds. Release the hand letting go of tension for 20 – 30 seconds. Notice the hand and forearm feel lighter. Note the difference between the tensed and relaxed states. Repeat these steps with

each muscle group in the body: arms, face, neck, chest, back, stomach, hips, legs and feet.

*Passive Progressive Muscle Relaxation* – this is a process of imagining all the muscles of the body relaxing gradually. As in the active progressive muscle relaxation, begin at the top of the head, and work your way down, imagining letting go of tension or tightness. For instance, as you pay attention to the muscles in your face, around your eyes and in your jaw, imagine all tension and tightness being released, allowing your face to be soft and comfortable. An alternative to this exercise starts at the feet and works up the body.

## IMAGERY TRAINING

Sometimes called Guided Imagery, this skill uses relaxing images and thoughts. Just as it is difficult to be physically tense and relaxed at the same time, it is difficult for the mind to be racing with stressful thoughts if you are thinking about a peaceful and calm place. Relaxing thoughts may be used to reduce anxiety or decrease pain while enjoying a deep state of physical relaxation.

Start by remembering a pleasant scene, maybe a place you wish you could visit, or somewhere you love. For example, if you choose the beach, visualize details like the sand, the horizon and the white crest of the ocean waves. Imagine you hear the surf as it moves in and out along the shoreline, or the sounds of sea gulls calling out in the sky above.

Breathe deeply and imagine inhaling the salty air through your nose or feeling the sand between your toes as you walk along the beach. Take your time to enjoy these feelings, and if other thoughts come to mind, just let them leave as easily as they came, focusing again on the pleasant image.

It may be helpful to use a technique called “thought stopping” to help refocus. Just tell yourself “STOP” when an intrusive thought enters, then quickly refocus on the imagery you are creating. A peaceful image might be a tropical island, a mountain top, the rain forest, clouds, lakes, the ocean, a sunny beach, a field of wild flowers, or any memory of a favorite place or events.

## MEDITATION

This skill helps to focus all awareness on one thing: a sight, a sound, a thought or a sensation, in order to achieve a deep state of relaxation. Meditation brings awareness into the present moment. Most of the stress we encounter is due to thoughts based in the past or the future; meditation may work simply by bringing our consciousness fully into the present.

You can begin by choosing an object or sound to focus on. Soothing sounds, sometimes called mantras, such as “aahhh” or “om” are traditionally used. Sit in a quiet place, in a comfortable position, and without controlling breathing, just become aware of the breath and feel the air and it enters and exits the nose. When the mind wanders, gently refocus on breathing.

Assume a passive attitude without forcing yourself to relax. If focusing on an object, for example a candle flame, leave the eyes open. As you focus on the sound or object either repeat the sound silently to yourself or continue to look directly at the object. Direct all attention to the sound or object chosen. The longer attention is focused the more relaxed you will become.

Meditation could be for a few moments or 30 minutes. When you feel it is time to stop, allow your mind to wander or let it be silent, then slowly and gradually come back into full awareness.

## EXERCISE

Some type of physical exercise each day help the mind and body release pent up energy, tension or stress. Good forms of gentle exercise might include:

- Walking
- Gentle stretching
- Yoga
- Tai Chi or Qi Gong
- Swimming

Remember that relaxation is an important part of a healthy and well-balanced life.

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