

## Relaxation Exercises

When doing any of these exercises, start by sitting upright in a comfortable chair. Your feet should be flat on the floor, with your arms resting comfortably at your sides. Closing your eyes may help you focus on the exercise. If you can't find a comfortable position while sitting upright, try reclining in a chair or on the couch or lying down. However, these relaxation exercises aren't intended to make you fall asleep; rather, they're meant to help you achieve a deeper level of relaxation so that when it's time for you to get into bed at night, you feel calmer and more at peace.

**Breathing Exercises** For the following two breathing exercises, read through the entire exercise a few times before you try it so that you can remember the steps and do the exercise without having to read the instructions. Another option is to record the instructions and play the recording back to yourself each time you do the exercise until you've learned it.

**Diaphragmatic Breathing** This exercise focuses on your breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing is a form of breathing that expands your abdomen or diaphragm, rather than your chest, as you inhale. The diaphragm is actually the primary breathing muscle in your body, but we often don't breathe this way due to the emphasis society places on a flat, toned abdomen. In addition, many people have tension in their back, chest, and stomach due to high stress levels. This can make it difficult for your diaphragm to perform the way it should: allowing the stomach to expand while breathing, rather than simply the chest. To see how you're breathing, place one hand on your stomach, above your belly button but below your rib cage. Place your other hand on your chest. In diaphragmatic breathing, only the hand on your abdomen should move up and down when you breathe, while the hand on your chest remains essentially still. Diaphragmatic breathing allows you to breathe more efficiently, so it's less work for your muscles. It also allows you to keep your neck and shoulder muscles more relaxed while breathing (Poppen 1998). Diaphragmatic breathing can have an overall calming effect, and since it's incompatible with shallow, rapid breathing, it can be especially helpful for reducing feelings of anxiety. In addition to focusing on expanding your abdomen while breathing, make note of how many breaths you take each minute. Most people take between eight and twenty breaths per minute while at rest, with the average resting respiratory rate in healthy adults being about twelve breaths per minute (Sherwood 2006). While practicing diaphragmatic breathing, try to decrease your respiratory rate to about six breaths per minute. Slowing down your breathing will allow you to relax more and more with each breath you take. It's important to exhale slowly, as this will help you relax even more. Now that you understand the overall concept, here's are some instructions for practicing diaphragmatic breathing. For this exercise, you need to have a clock close by so that you can measure your breathing rate. Sit in a comfortable chair with your feet

flat on the floor. If you can't find a comfortable position while sitting upright, try reclining in a chair or even lying down the first few times you practice diaphragmatic breathing:

- 1) Place one hand on your abdomen and the other on your chest.
- 2) Take several slow, deep breaths through your nose.
- 3) Which of your hands is moving up and down? It should be the lower hand, the one on your abdomen. Your chest should remain relatively still during this breathing exercise.
- 4) Continue taking slow, deep breaths until you can feel your abdomen expanding and contracting with each breath you take.
- 5) Look at the clock and count how many breaths you take for one full minute.
- 6) Try to decrease the number of breaths you take to about six breaths per minute. If you inhale for about five seconds and exhale for about five seconds, your overall breathing rate will be about six breaths per minute. As a rough guide, slowly count 1-2-3-4-5 each time you inhale and 1-2-3-4-5 each time you exhale. If you prefer, you can say the letters A-B-C-D-E as you inhale and exhale.
- 7) Another way to slow down your breathing is to pause briefly after you inhale. So you inhale, counting 1-2-3-4-5 (or A-B-C-D-E), pause for a second or two, and then exhale for about five seconds.
- 8) If you can't initially inhale or exhale for a full five seconds, that's fine. Just start with what you can do, inhaling and exhaling for three or four seconds. With practice, your breathing will slow down and it will be easier for you to take regular, slow, deep breaths.
- 9) Keep a steady breathing pace. Once you can maintain a slow, even breathing pattern, close your eyes and repeat a soothing word in your head, such as "calm" or "peace," with each inhalation and exhalation. Start off by practicing for just five minutes each day and work up to ten to fifteen minutes each day. Remember that practice makes perfect. For this breathing exercise to help you slow your breathing rate and decrease your level of anxiety when you're feeling stressed-out, upset, or tense, you need to already be good at it.

## Deep Breathing

Now that you've learned how to do diaphragmatic breathing, you can move on to deep breathing. It's important to master diaphragmatic breathing first, because deep breathing incorporates parts of it. Deep breathing is just what it sounds like: very slow, deep breathing. It involves expanding the diaphragm and abdomen while inhaling, followed by expanding your chest. By involving the respiratory muscles of the chest in this deep breathing exercise, you're going one step further than you did with the diaphragmatic breathing. Of course, diaphragmatic breathing also fills your lungs with oxygen each time you inhale, but in diaphragmatic breathing you typically exhale before your chest also starts expanding, so only the hand on your abdomen moves up and down. With deep breathing, both hands move up and down. You should still start off your breathing by inhaling slowly, allowing your abdomen to expand. Basically, you're pumping your lungs each time you expand your abdomen. This allows your lungs to fill up with oxygen without doing the pumping, which is what happens in shallow, rapid breathing. In this exercise, you'll take longer breaths than you did in diaphragmatic breathing, counting to ten with each inhalation and each exhalation. This exercise can be very powerful when you're feeling anxious or stressed. Now that you have a good understanding of the overall concept, here are some instructions for practicing deep breathing:

- 1) Sit in a comfortable chair.
- 2) Put one hand on your abdomen and the other hand on your chest.
- 3) Breathe in slowly and comfortably through your nose, then exhale through your nose, again slowly and comfortably. Continue breathing through your nose throughout the exercise.
- 4) Feel your abdomen rise and fall. Practice this for a few breaths.
- 5) Now slowly inhale again and then pause for a few seconds before exhaling. Your breathing should be very slow, even, and regular.
- 6) Slowly exhale.
- 7) Inhale slowly again and really feel how your abdomen expands and the air enters your lungs. The hand on your belly should rise, followed by a slight rise of the hand on your chest.
- 8) Slowly exhale, trying to keep your breathing as slow and even as you can.
- 9) Next, as you inhale, first expand your abdomen, then expand your chest to fill your lungs even further. Pause for a few seconds, and then slowly empty out the air, first from your chest area, then from your abdomen.
- 10) Next, try counting to ten with each breath. Inhale slowly, silently and slowly counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10, then pause for one to three seconds, then release, exhaling and

silently counting 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10. If you prefer, you can also think of the letters A through J in your head as you inhale and exhale.

- 11) Your hands should remain on your abdomen and chest until you feel comfortable that you can do the exercise properly without them. At that point, feel free to rest your hands comfortably at your sides.

Initially, practice this deep breathing exercise for five minutes each day, and work up to ten to fifteen minutes each day if you like. Once you've gotten used to the slow-paced rhythm of this deep breathing exercise, you can repeat a soothing word such as "calm," "peace," or "breathe" in your head with each inhalation and exhalation.

### **Guided Imagery**

The previous exercises focused on breathing. Now let's move on to guided imagery. This type of relaxation exercise involves imagining a certain place where you could feel very relaxed, such as the beach, a park, or a mountain. These exercises focus on the senses of sight, sound, smell, touch, and temperature to help you relax (Poppen 1998).

By imagining a peaceful scene and then allowing yourself to become absorbed in the sensory experiences that go along with that imagined scene, you can achieve a significant level of calm and relaxation. While doing guided imagery, some people experience decreased tension, slower heart rate, deeper breathing, and a feeling of warmth in the hands and feet (Bourne 2005). I've included several different scenes. Once you get the hang of guided imagery, you can create your own scenes tailored to what you find most relaxing. It's a good idea to read the scripts aloud and record them so you can play them back and practice them while keeping your eyes closed. Similarly, if you choose to create your own peaceful scenes, you can write them down first and then record them as you read them aloud. You can also buy a wide variety of relaxation and guided imagery CDs or download them from online music stores. The Resources section at the end of the book includes information on some recommended recordings that contain exercises similar to those in this chapter. When recording visualization exercises, try to keep a slow, even pace as you read the script. This will help you maintain a calm and soothing tone throughout the exercise. Before you start the actual visualization, take a few slow breaths. Sit comfortably in a chair or on the floor, or lie down if you prefer. Focus in on the words in the script. Keeping your eyes closed may be helpful. When you've reached the end of the visualization, take a few more cleansing breaths before opening your eyes.

## **The Mountain**

You're sitting on top of a mountain, at a place where you can see for miles all around you. The air is fresh and cool. You take a deep breath and enjoy the smell of the forest down below and all around you. You are wearing comfortable pants, a light sweater, socks, and shoes. You feel energized and light. The forest below you seems as though it is endless, like it goes on forever. It is autumn, and the leaves on the trees are many beautiful colors. You see red, orange, yellow, and green leaves. You can feel the dirt on your hands, which are resting beside you, touching the ground beneath you. The dirt is soft and smooth. You can hear birds singing. The sky is very blue, with no clouds in sight. In the distance, you can hear a waterfall. You take in a deep breath and smell the wonderful pine trees that are growing at the top of the mountain. The smell is refreshing and soothing. You close your eyes and take a few more breaths. You feel very calm and peaceful.

## **The Park**

It's early in the morning on a beautiful spring day. You have arrived at the park before there is much activity. You find a comfortable spot on the grass and sit down to enjoy the morning sun. Although it's warm out, you feel a nice, refreshing breeze passing through your hair. Your skin is soaking up the early morning sunshine, and you feel at peace. There are several large oak trees nearby, and you see squirrels running up and down them. You don't hear anything, except perhaps the breeze itself as it rustles the leaves on the trees. You smell the dew on the grass. It is no longer wet, but the dewy smell lingers, with its fresh, early morning scent. The sun is still rising. The colors are beautiful in the sky. There are a few small clouds. It looks like it will be a lovely day. You spread a blanket out on the grass and lie down, with just your bare feet touching the grass. You look up at the sky and see a flock of birds flying. You feel happy, calm, and completely relaxed.

## **The Lake**

You're sitting on a small beach that overlooks a beautiful lake. It is tranquil on the lake, with little ripples occasionally showing where the fish are swimming. You feel the sand beneath your body, with your feet digging into the soft, warm grains of sand. You feel the sand between your toes. The sand is practically white. Its smoothness calms your senses. You look out onto the lake and see a sailboat. It's sailing peacefully in the summer breeze. The day is warm and the sun feels good. You stand up and walk toward the lake. You slowly step into the lake, allowing the water to reach just above your ankles. It's cool and refreshing. As you walk a bit deeper into the water, your knees and hips are now wet. You love the calmness of the water. There are no

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waves, just clear, blue water. It is the perfect temperature on this warm summer day. You take a deep breath and fill your lungs with the fresh air. You feel totally relaxed and alive.

## **Muscle Relaxation**

Now let's move on to exercises that help relax your muscles. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tightening and releasing, or tensing and relaxing, various muscles in your body. This technique was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson in the early 1920s based on his belief that, because anxiety and muscular tension often go hand in hand, we can decrease anxiety by learning how to relax our muscles. Dr. Joseph Wolpe, one of the founders of behavior therapy, took Jacobson's idea a step further (Poppen 1998) and developed a method for treating certain types of anxiety. Called systematic desensitization, this technique involves imaginary or real exposure to a feared stimulus while simultaneously relaxing the muscles. Dr. Wolpe found that anxiety was incompatible with a fully relaxed state, explaining why this technique is useful for helping people overcome fears, phobias, and anxiety.

## **Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

Before beginning progressive muscle relaxation, be sure you're wearing comfortable, loose-fitting clothing. Find a quiet place where you can get comfortable. This may be inside your house, or even outside in a quiet spot in your backyard or the park. It's important to minimize distractions, so be sure to turn off your computer, cell phone, pager, radio, television, or anything else that may disturb you. Next, sit or lie down in a comfortable position in which your entire body is supported. For a seated position, sitting in a recliner or on a sofa propped up with pillows works well. If you'd like to lie down, try your bed, the sofa, the floor, or even a blanket on the grass. Just remember that, like the other relaxation exercises you've learned so far, progressive muscle relaxation is meant to help you relax, not make you fall asleep. During this exercise, you'll tighten and then release sixteen different groups of muscles. Each time you tighten, or tense, a muscle group, try to do so for ten seconds. Each time you release, or relax, a muscle group, try to do so for fifteen seconds. If you feel pain in any muscles as you're tensing them, decrease the level of tension slightly until you're more comfortable. If you continue to have pain there, skip that muscle group. If you have an injury, such as a pulled muscle, or any other medical condition that might make it inadvisable to tense your muscles, consult with your doctor before you try this exercise. Take a few deep breaths before beginning this exercise. Although you can progress through your muscles in a different order if you prefer, this exercise will start with your toes and gradually work up to your head and face:

- 1) **Toes.** Curl your toes, digging them into the floor. Try not to tense your legs while you do this. Hold your toes in this position for ten seconds, counting to ten slowly. Then release your toes upward and relax. Count slowly to fifteen, keeping your toes relaxed.
- 2) **Feet** and calves. Point your toes and hold for ten seconds. Relax your feet for fifteen seconds.
- 3) **Shins.** Contract your shin muscles by flexing your feet upward. Do this slowly so you don't get a cramp. Keep your feet flexed upward for ten seconds, and then release for fifteen seconds.
- 4) **Thighs.** Contract your thigh muscles as tightly as you can by either extending your legs forward and raising them while tensing them, or simply by squeezing the muscles in your thighs tightly. Hold for ten seconds, and then relax for fifteen seconds.
- 5) **Buttocks.** Tense and squeeze your buttock muscles for ten seconds. Relax for fifteen seconds and feel the tension being released.
- 6) **Stomach.** Tighten your abdominal muscles by pulling in your stomach as much as you can for ten seconds. Keep tensing the muscles as you count. Relax and release for fifteen seconds, allowing your stomach muscles to fully relax.
- 7) **Back.** Arch your back while still keeping your shoulders supported. Hold for ten seconds, and then release for fifteen seconds. If you have a back injury or if this causes pain, skip this one.
- 8) **Chest.** Take a long, deep breath, tighten your chest muscles, and hold for ten seconds. Exhale and relax for fifteen seconds, breathing comfortably and normally for a few more breaths.
- 9) **Hands.** Squeeze your hands into fists for ten seconds, then allow your fingers to relax and extend for fifteen seconds.
- 10) **Biceps and triceps.** Tense your biceps by bringing your forearms up, like when you're "showing your muscles." Hold for ten seconds, and then release, allowing your hands to drop down to your sides and relax for fifteen seconds. Next, tighten your triceps muscles by straightening your arms out, contracting the backs of your upper arms, and holding for ten seconds. Then release for fifteen seconds.
- 11) **Shoulders.** Tighten and squeeze your shoulders back, holding for ten seconds. Then allow your shoulders to slump forward, relaxing, for fifteen seconds. If this causes pain or if you have a shoulder injury, you can skip this one.
- 12) **Neck.** Straighten your shoulders and keep them relaxed while turning your head slowly to the right side. Turn your head as far as you can and then hold it there for ten seconds. Bring your head back to a neutral position and relax for fifteen seconds. Repeat on the left side, turning your head as far as you can and holding it there for ten seconds. Release and let your head face forward for fifteen seconds. Next, drop your chin into

your chest and hold it there for ten seconds. Then relax your neck muscles for fifteen seconds.

13) **Mouth.** Open your jaw as much as you can, stretching your mouth open wide. Hold for ten seconds, and then relax, closing your mouth for fifteen seconds. Next, smile as widely as you can, stretching your lips to the sides, and hold for ten seconds. Release and relax for fifteen seconds.

14) **Tongue.** Touch your tongue to the roof of your mouth and dig it in for ten seconds, then relax for fifteen seconds. Next, dig your tongue into the bottom of your mouth for ten seconds, and then relax for fifteen seconds.

15) **Eyes.** Open your eyes as wide as you can and hold for ten seconds, then relax for fifteen seconds. Next, shut your eyes tightly and hold for ten seconds, then keep your eyes closed, but relax them for fifteen seconds.

16) **Forehead.** Raise your eyebrows as high as you can, tightening the muscles in your forehead. Hold for ten seconds, and then release for fifteen seconds, bringing your eyebrows back down and smoothing out your forehead.

Try practicing progressive muscle relaxation every day for at least one week . Many people benefit by practicing this exercise at least twice daily. Once you're familiar with the exercise, you can pick and choose which muscles to tense and relax and tailor it to your individual needs.

### **Relaxing Your Muscles, Calming Your Thoughts, and Focusing On Your Breathing**

Now that you've learned diaphragmatic breathing , deep breathing, guided imagery, and progressive muscle relaxation, you can combine these techniques into a relaxation exercise that will help you relax your muscles, calm your thoughts, and focus on slow, comfortable breathing. You may find it helpful to record this exercise so that you can practice it easily while listening, rather than having to read through the exercise or remember the process. Where a pause is indicated, pause for about five seconds. Begin by getting into a comfortable position in which your body is fully supported and closing your eyes. Muscle, Thought, and Breath Relaxation Exercise You are resting with your eyes closed. All of the parts of your body are supported , so there's no need to tense any muscle. Relax as much as you can (pause). Focus your attention on your right hand and release whatever tension you may have there (pause). Relax all of your other muscles as much as you can (pause). Relax the muscles in your right forearm, feeling more and more relaxed (pause). Breathe slowly and calmly, relaxing more and more (pause). Release the tension in your arm muscles, more and more deeply. Relax (pause). Now relax the muscles in your right upper arm Relax them as much as you can. Continue relaxing your entire right arm, your right hand, and your fingers. Relax as much as you can (pause). Relax. While

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continuing to relax your right arm and hand, focus your attention on your left hand. Relax your left hand as much as you can (pause). Feel the relaxation in your left arm as your muscles are beginning to relax, more and more deeply (pause). Release the tension, more and more profoundly. Relax more and more (pause). Continue to relax more and more, much more (pause). Breathe slowly and deeply, relaxing more and more (pause). Now relax both of your shoulders and feel the weight lift. Feel the relaxation inside your shoulders, arms, hands, and fingers, calming you more and more (pause). Release the weight from your muscles, more and more (pause). You feel warmth in your muscles as you relax them more and more deeply. Your breathing is slow and even. Now move to the muscles of your face. Smooth out your forehead.

Relax those muscles more and more (pause). As you think of relaxing those muscles, you feel relaxation spreading through them slowly and gradually. Your eyes remain lightly closed (pause). The relaxation is slowly moving to your cheeks, releasing all tension (pause). Your jaw and tongue are relaxed, more and more deeply (pause). Relax as much as you can. With each breath, you release more and more tension. With each breath, you relax more and more (pause). Feel the relaxation moving to your neck, then down to your chest, while you continue relaxing more and more (pause). When you feel that you can release even more tension, simply relax as much as you can, more and more deeply (pause). Your breathing is calm, slow, and regular, releasing more and more tension each time you exhale (pause). Your chest is relaxed. Relax down to your stomach, feeling more and more relaxed (pause). Relax as much as you can. Relax. Feel the relaxation in your hips, lower back, and buttocks while still resting comfortably. Relax more and more deeply (pause). The relaxation is now moving to your thighs and legs. You feel more and more relaxed (pause). More and more relaxed. More deeply relaxed. You are continuing to relax more deeply, more and more (pause). More and more. With each breath, you continue to relax more and more, releasing all of the tension inside your body (pause). Now relax your lower legs and your feet, relaxing more and more (pause). To help you relax a bit more, I will count backward from 10 to 1. When I say each number, see if you can relax more and more each time. Even when you think it's impossible to relax further, continue to try to relax more and more, enjoying more calm and relaxation (pause).

10, relax your body more and more (pause).

9, more and more deeply relaxed (pause).

8, slow and deep breathing, more and more relaxed (pause).

7, more and more (pause).

6, relax your whole body, feeling more and more relaxed (pause).

5, relaxing more and more deeply, breathing slowly and deeply, relaxing your entire body (pause).

4, all of your body feeling more and more relaxed , feeling warm and alive, feeling more and more calm (pause).

3, relaxing more and more deeply, calmness all around you, feeling more and more relaxed (pause).

2, more and more deeply relaxed, taking slow , deep breaths (pause).

1, continue relaxing your body like this, more and more (pause).

Now I want you to think of the word “peace” every time you breathe. I want you to relax every time you breathe and repeat the word “peace” in your head. That way, you will associate the word “peace” in your head with the peaceful state you are now in. Every time you breathe, I want you to think in silence the word “peace.” Do this in your head until I speak to you again (pause for three minutes). Very good. This exercise is now finished. I am going to count from 10 to 1, and when I arrive at the number 1, you will open your eyes and feel calm, relaxed, and awake. 10... 9... 8... 7 ...6... 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...Open your eyes; you are awake.

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

In order to really learn the relaxation techniques in this section, you need to practice them often. They can help you to cope with stress and will promote a healthier lifestyle. If you want these exercises to work for you when you’re feeling anxious or stressed, you need to practice them at other times first. Don’t feel frustrated if you have difficulty learning these techniques at first, and don’t give up too quickly. It may take a dozen times of practicing the breathing exercises, for example, before you can consistently do them correctly and actually feel more relaxed. It’s also okay to alter the exercises to meet your needs. For example, if you want to replace the word “peace” in the last exercise with the word “calm” because you associate your state of mind during that exercise with calmness, then you should do it. These exercises need not be adhered to so strictly. Instead, you should adjust them so that they make sense and work for you. The instructions provided simply offer general guidelines. Explore these and various other relaxation techniques to find what’s best for you,