

# Relaxation: Benefits and Types

## What is it?

Therapeutic Relaxation is an active process that can be achieved in a variety of ways. It involves concentration on certain routines of muscle relaxation, imagery and breathing. As a result, the body's heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure and even body temperature are lowered. People report a sense of well-being as well as the physical benefits.

## Is it the same as Meditation?

No. While the physiological effects are the same, meditation involves clearing the mind of all thought. It can take longer to master meditation, and is difficult to do when under stress, since thoughts can intrude and spoil the experience.

## Which is better?

Neither. It is often a good idea to begin with Relaxation routines, and then try meditation. Because Therapeutic Relaxation requires concentration on the routine, it can be easier than meditation at a time of high stress. Many people are unable to meditate, but the majority can master Therapeutic Relaxation relatively quickly.

## If I Relax or Meditate regularly, can I cure my cancer?

Some people believe that meditation and therapeutic relaxation can help cure cancer. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. There have been no clinical trials to prove or disprove the idea. However the physiological and emotional effects of both these activities can have a marked effect on well-being, symptoms of stress and treatment side-effects.

## What is so good about Relaxation?

1. It is inexpensive and easy to practise. All you need is a comfortable bed or chair, and tape or CD player to listen to a suitable guided recording to begin with.
2. You are in control. You decide when and how often you want to do it. You can learn to control the way you feel.
3. Symptoms can be relieved. Stress-related symptoms such as high blood pressure, pain, digestive disturbances, nausea and fatigue may be reduced as the body relaxes.
4. The immune system can be boosted. When under stress, people have higher levels of cortisol, an immune suppressant, in their system. Therapeutic Relaxation can reduce the amount of cortisol, resulting in a more efficient immune system.
5. You can boost your energy levels. Half an hour of Relaxation can be as restful as two hours of sleep.
6. You feel calmer and more able to deal with difficulties. Relaxation induces a sense of well-being, and this in turn helps clear the head for more effective problem solving.

7. You might be able to reduce medication for stress-related symptoms. Because Relaxation has a physiological effect on the body, and is an antidote to stress, you may not need to take so much prescribed medicine. (Always speak with your doctor before reducing medication.)

## **I have tried to relax before, but it wasn't successful. Why?**

You probably haven't found the right style for you. There is a range of Therapeutic Relaxation methods which can be tried. Just as each person responds differently to stress and pressure, we all react differently to spoken words, thoughts and images. There is no single "right" way to achieve relaxation. Some people are more able to relate to physical actions (letting go of muscle tension or deep breathing), others are good at visualising (objects, scenes etc.) while still others relate more to physical sensations (touch, hearing and smell).

There are a number of people who can't sit still long enough to gain the benefit of Therapeutic Relaxation, and there are some quick techniques that can help these people. Alternatively, something that is based on movement, such as Tai Chi could be tried. You can discuss your specific situation with a Relaxation Practitioner.

## **What is a Relaxation Practitioner?**

There is a range of health professionals who may teach Therapeutic Relaxation. Occupational Therapists, Psychologists and social workers comprise the bulk of these.

## **I feel bad that I don't relax regularly. What can I do?**

First, do not set yourself a goal that is too difficult to achieve. Know that whatever you are able to do will be beneficial. The thought of practicing relaxation should not be the cause of more stress. If you are only able to relax for 15 minutes, once a week, then that is better than not at all. The more you do, the greater the effect – up to a point. If you spend too much time relaxing, you will not be able to enjoy other activities in life! While undergoing active treatment a realistic goal is 10-15 minutes 3 to 4 times a week. Thirty minutes a day is plenty.

## **How do I do it?**

Choose to practice at a time of day and place that is best for you. Ideally sit in a well-supported chair or lie in a bed if unable to sit comfortably. Relaxation requires concentration, so minimise distractions. If you find your mind wanders, return your focus to the exercise and continue. Feeling sleepy is common; however try to remain awake until the end of the exercise and the benefit will be greater. (If you do fall asleep, you will still gain some of the benefit.)

Each person achieves relaxation in a different way. If you are finding the methods on your recording unsuccessful, there are other ways of achieving the same goals of health and well-being. Take time to discuss this with an Occupational Therapist or other health professional experienced in stress management.

After you have learned to relax in your chosen place, with verbal instructions (tape or CD), try it without the tape/CD. You might like to choose your own soothing music.

In daily life, when you feel your stress level rising, you can use some quick techniques, such as Three Deep Breaths, focusing on muscle tension release, the Calming Response or various images that are powerful for you.

## Types of Relaxation Techniques:

1. Breathing mediation- focuses on breathing and clearing the mind. Is a good technique to use in an acutely stressful situation, however needs regular practice first to be good at the technique.
2. Progressive Muscle relaxation- focuses on systematically relaxing the muscles through the body. Recommend avoidance of tense and release with cancer patients due to multiple treatment and pain sites. Good for people who are new to relaxation, people with decreased concentration, older males and sceptics
3. Visual Imagery- taking your mind to another place, and experiencing the senses of that place. A good distraction technique. Good technique for patients having difficulty with tolerating claustrophobia with radiation.

## What method shouldn't be used for someone?

- Do not use a technique they will make symptoms worse.
- Pain - do not use a tense and release technique. Leave out the tensing part.
- Shortness of breath - don't use breathing as the major focus.
- Psychological Disturbances - be cautious using visual imagery

**Please contact your therapist if you have any queries or concerns.**

**Therapist:** \_\_\_\_\_

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