

Relaxation Exercises

Though some people seem naturally able to relax, everyone can learn how to relax a little more effectively. This can be particularly helpful while driving, before eating a meal or before going to sleep. Relaxation exercises basically involve the flexing and releasing of major muscle groups. People are often unaware of how much muscle tension they have built up in their bodies until they do one of these exercises. Here are some tips to help you on your way.

Which relaxation exercise can be done in the car?

Despite heavy traffic, episodes of “road rage” and other stresses related to being in a car, driving can actually offer a time of solitude and privacy if people choose to take advantage of it. Anyone can use travel time to relax by using relaxation exercises such as the following:

1. Squeeze the steering wheel as tightly as possible for a few seconds, and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when *not* squeezing the steering wheel.
2. Tense up your arms as hard as you can (without pulling on the steering wheel). Hold this for a few seconds and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.
3. Shrug your shoulders up as high as you can for a few seconds and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.
4. Push your shoulders forward as far as you can for a few seconds and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.
5. Open your eyes as wide as you can (blink as necessary) for a few seconds, and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.
6. Frown as strongly as you can, tightly clenching your teeth, so that someone who saw you might think that you were angry. Hold this for a few seconds, and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.
7. Push your head as far back into the chair behind you as you can for a few seconds, and then let go. Pay attention to how different it feels when relaxed.

When people do these exercises, they may notice that they had been clenching muscles or holding in muscle tension without being aware of it. These exercises help to realize this and let go.

Which relaxation exercise can be done before a meal?

The stress response takes energy from systems such as the digestive system and uses it to prepare the body for fight or flight. Unfortunately, that means that people under stress tend to eat their food too fast, swallowing it without enjoying the flavor or chewing it adequately. An hour later, they often find it difficult to digest their rapidly eaten, often unhealthy food, which can lead to **heartburn** and/or gastric reflux. There are a variety of digestive disorders that are believed to be stress-related, including irritable bowel syndrome. A relaxation exercise such as the following may be helpful:

1. Find a private place.
2. Tense as many muscles as you can, squeezing your toes, thighs, buttocks, shoulders, arms and so forth. Your hands should be balled into fists, your jaw should be clenched and

your eyes should be squeezed as tightly closed as possible. Hold this position for several seconds.

3. When ready, relax all your muscles at once. Take a deep breath and feel the difference when fully relaxed throughout your entire body.
4. Enjoy your meal.

Which relaxation exercise can be done before sleep?

Thinking about stressful situations before going to sleep can trigger the stress response, which is the exact opposite of what the body requires in order to wind down and go to sleep. A relaxation exercise can help people to get their attention from their racing thoughts to their hard-working body's need for sleep. The following relaxation exercise may be done with soft music, nature sounds (e.g., ocean waves) or a relaxation tape playing in the background. It may also be done in conjunction with a **meditation exercise** or **breathing exercise**.

Each step of this exercise can be done while lying in bed. The steps are as follows:

1. Close your eyes and take three deep, cleansing breaths. Focus on inhaling clean air and exhaling stale air.
2. Continuing to breathe deeply, spend a few moments focusing your attention on your toes. You will have fully focused your attention on this part of your body when you can mentally visualize the position of each toe. This in itself can be quite relaxing as attention shifts from the mind to the body.
3. When fully focused on your toes, flex them as tightly as you can for a few seconds and then let go. Notice how much more relaxed they feel after letting go.
4. Next, flex your calf muscles by pointing your toes as far back toward your head as possible while keeping your legs out straight. (Do not try this if you get muscle cramps in the calf muscles of your legs.) Hold for a few seconds and then release, noticing the difference. Continue this alternate flexing and releasing through the thighs, buttocks, stomach, shoulders, neck and jaw muscles.
5. Lastly, open your eyes as widely as possible with eyebrows up high for a few seconds, and then release. Once released, close your eyes and feel the relaxation throughout your body.

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