

Deep Breathing

The key to deep breathing exercises is to use the stomach, not mainly your chest. Inhale a deep breath through your nose (to the count of 4) and then force the stomach out. Doing that in effect pulls the diaphragm down. Your diaphragm is a strong body muscle, which has the effect of pulling down the lungs, which permits air to travel deep down into the lungs. When you exhale out through your mouth (to the count of 4 again), you need to do the reverse by sucking in your stomach, using your stomach muscles. The effect of pulling your stomach in forces your diaphragm to move up and effectively pushes the strongly breath out the lungs.

Visualization Exercises to Calm Your Nerves

We use visualization every day. Before you head off to the park or beach, you may have an image in your mind of the place. You may daydream about a beautiful place you want to go for vacation. These images usually put us in a positive mood and create feelings of relaxation. Visualization exercises can have the same effect. The technique is simple to learn and works quickly. Use it to reduce anxiety or whenever you are in a stressful situation.

For these exercises, feel free to be as imaginative as you want in creating the scenery in your mind. It's normal that your mind will wander. Just allow yourself to passively come back to your imagery.

Exercise 1

Familiarize yourself with these steps. When you're ready, spend the next 10 to 15 minutes to create the scenery of your choice in your mind.

1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes.
2. Create an image in your mind of some place where you felt truly relaxed, calm, and happy.
3. In this picture, observe what is happening there. Notice the colors of the scenery. Notice the quiet atmosphere, or freshness of the air. Notice the shapes of familiar objects, and be aware of any movement that occurred.
4. Just let yourself recall the positive feelings in that scene. Enjoy what you remember and what you see in your mind's eye. Breathe deeply and relax.

Exercise 2

The exercise may take 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Sit or lie down in a quiet place and try to construct a scene in your mind.

Prepare to relax by breathing deeply and evenly. Breathe in slowly to a count of four. Hold your breath to a count of two. And exhale slowly. As you continue to breathe deeply and evenly, in your mind's eye create a picture of a pleasant scene. Imagine yourself doing something relaxing—walking on the beach while listening to the sound of the waves with the cool fresh breeze blowing across your face and through your hair, or maybe walking in the woods with the warm sun shining on you and the birds singing in the trees. Imagine some experience that you personally found relaxing.

Pause 15 seconds, then continue:

Go on imagining this scene. Continue to breathe deeply and evenly. Allow yourself to recall the details of the experience—remembering the sights, the sounds, the smells, the feelings, and the mood. Just let yourself re-experience the moments. Breathe deeply and evenly. Just relax and enjoy the memory.

Pause 30 seconds, then continue:

You may now return to your waking state and remain calm now that your body has re-experienced the pleasant feelings that you had. Open your eyes, feeling refreshed and calm.

20-Minute Muscle Relaxation Exercise

We're going to review ways to relax different muscles groups to achieve relaxation throughout your body. You may experience muscle tension and pain from sitting or standing in one position too long, doing heavy lifting, or walking a lot. Staying in one position without taking breaks can cause poor blood circulation and muscle tension. This relaxation exercise is great for relieving such aches and pains. This exercise works because it applies this principle of muscle behavior: when you contract and release your muscles, they smooth out and relax.

Spend 20 to 30 minutes to practice at least once a day. As you become more experienced, you'll get significant relaxation benefits in 10 to 15 minutes. **Your goal is to develop the ability to relax one muscle group at anytime.** For example, if you were sitting at your desk for an extended period, and you noticed your neck muscles getting tense, you would mentally isolate those muscles and relax them.

PLEASE NOTE: Check with your physician or health care provider to see if there are any reasons for you to take specific precautions or to avoid doing contraction exercises with your muscles. This exercise *may not be appropriate* if you're experiencing a lot of pain, particularly in your joints. If this is the case, try a different relaxation technique recommended by an expert for your special needs.

Instructions:

Lie down or sit in a chair that comfortably supports your arms and head. For each muscle group, go through these steps:

1. Tense your muscles and hold (tightly, but not so much that it hurts) for 5 to 10 seconds. Notice the tension as you hold. Remember that feeling of tension.
2. Release your muscles, and relax. Notice how your muscles feel as you let go. You may feel sensations of warmth, heaviness, lightness, or tingling. These are sensations of relaxation.
3. Give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax and feel the sensations of your muscles relaxing. Enjoy the sensations. Remember them. Repeat twice, then go on to next muscle group.

Hands and Lower Arms - Tense by making a fist with your hand. *Repeat twice on each side.*

Biceps (front of upper arm) - Tense by bending arm at the elbow, but keeping wrist and hand as loose as possible. *Repeat twice on each side.*

Triceps (front of upper arm) - Tense by straightening arm, but keeping hand loose. *Repeat twice on each side.*

Forehead - Tense by wrinkling it as you would if you were worried or angry. *Repeat.*

Eyebrows - Tense by frowning and creasing eyebrows. *Repeat.*

Eyelids - Tense by squeezing them tightly together (remove contact lenses before beginning exercise). *Repeat.*

Eyes

*Roll eyes up (hold and release).

*Roll them down (hold and release).

*Shift them to right (hold and release).

*Shift them to left (hold and release).

*Roll your eyes clockwise slowly as if you were looking at each of the numbers on a huge clock.

*Roll your eyes counterclockwise slowly as if you were looking at each of the numbers on a huge clock.

Repeat.

Nose - Tense by wrinkling nose like a rabbit. *Repeat.*

Lips - Tense by tightly pressing them together or purse them as though sucking on a lemon. *Repeat.*

Jaws - Tighten the jaw muscles as if you were going to clench your teeth, but **don't actually allow your teeth to touch**. Hold this position for several seconds (no more than five seconds) and then release, closing your lips without touching your teeth. If you experience any pain, stop immediately and consult your dentist about whether or not this is safe for you. *Repeat once or twice*. You can still relax this area even if you have to skip this particular exercise by letting your jaw hang loosely while relaxing other areas.

Chin - Tense by tucking chin down into chest. Then tighten all your muscles under the chin and in the front of your neck. *Repeat*.

Tongue - Tense your tongue by pushing up against the back of your upper front teeth. *Repeat*. Let your tongue just float in your mouth. Enjoy the sensations there. *Repeat*.

Throat - Tense by beginning to swallow. Don't complete the swallow. Just hold after you begin. *Repeat*.

Voice box - Tense by humming a high-pitched note without making any sounds. *Begin humming silently down the scale. *Notice the change in tension levels as you sing down the scale. *Continue until you get to the low note. *Repeat*.

Neck - Tense by tilting head back and tightening muscles in the back of the neck. *Tilt head to right as though touching right shoulder. *Repeat on your left side*.

Shoulders - Tense by shrugging them upward as though touching your ears. *Repeat*.

Upper back - Tense by pulling shoulder blades back. *Then tighten upper back muscles as though as shoulder blades were going to touch. *Repeat*.

Lower back - Tense by arching back. *Repeat*.

Chest - Tense by pulling shoulders together in front. *Repeat*.

Stomach - Tense by pulling in your stomach muscles. *Repeat*.

Groin - Tense by pulling groin muscles up into the cavity of your body (same action as when you stop urinating in the middle of a urination). *Repeat*.

Buttocks - Tense by pulling them tightly together. *Repeat*.

Upper legs - Tense by straightening legs and locking knees. *Or to tense both legs at the same time, pull upper legs together by touching knees tightly together as though to hold a coin between your knees. *Repeat*.

Lower legs - Tense both legs by pulling toes back and up as though touching your shins. *Repeat*.

Feet - Tense by curling toes and arching feet downward (stop if they begin to cramp). *Repeat*.

Continue to breathe evenly and deeply. With your mind scan all your muscle groups again. Each time you exhale, notice how the muscle group you're focusing on, grows warmer, and is more relaxed.

Take a deep breath in through nose. Hold it to a count of four. Exhale slowly to a count of four. Do this several times. Breathe deeply and evenly, and enjoy the sensations of warm, full relaxation.

To end this exercise, move your hands and arms about. Move your feet and legs about. Turn your head from side to side. Open your eyes, sit up, and let yourself feel awake and calm.

* You may have a particular physical condition that warrants medical advice before using this exercise. Proceed with caution, as needed. Do not use meditation or suggestions that include saying "warm" if you have ulcers, as this may release stomach acid or cause pain.

** You may have some anxiety about your heart condition, or you may experience an increase in your heart rate, twitching, or an irregular heart beat when you recite this self-instruction. If this is the case, you may want to modify the self-instruction with the following: "My heartbeat is slightly calm." As you become comfortable with this instruction, you can go back to the original instruction.