



Learning to relax

Learning relaxation techniques can aid in reducing stress and help you enjoy a better quality of life, especially if you are struggling with an illness. Relaxation is also important for the mind and can help us be more productive during the day.

Chewing gum can offer up a great way to relieve stress and relax your body and mind a little. It has proven to show signs of lower cortisol levels too.

What is relaxation?

Relaxation is described as a process that decreases stress and anxiety. Relaxation techniques can help you cope with everyday stress and with the stress associated with illness and pain.

A relaxed state of mind

One of the ways our bodies cope with the effects of stress is by “powering down” every night when we sleep. During sleep, our bodies become very relaxed and our heart rate, pulse, respiration, blood pressure and body temperature decrease. This gives our bodies and minds a chance to renew. And while relaxation isn’t sleep, it does produce many of the same benefits of a good night’s sleep:

- Decreased muscle tension
- Lowered blood pressure

- Increased energy
- Improved immune-system functioning
- Reduced edginess or irritability
- Improved concentration

Relaxation does the opposite of what stress does, giving the body a break and helping to counteract many of the long- and short-term physical problems that stress can produce. Often, when you return to a challenging problem after a short relaxation break, you're able to focus better and generate new solutions.

How to relax

There are many ways to practice relaxation, so you might want to try several to see what works best for you. Among the more common are:

- Deep breathing—One of the simplest relaxation exercises is deep breathing. It can be used in almost any situation and involves taking slow, deep breaths, breathing from the diaphragm, and exhaling slowly to let the whole body relax a little more with each breath.
- Progressive (deep) muscle relaxation—This type of relaxation exercise involves alternately tensing, and then releasing, groups of muscles throughout the body. It's especially useful for those who say they feel tense everywhere.
- Passive muscle relaxation—This is like progressive muscle relaxation, except that the muscles aren't tensed first. You move through each part of your body in turn, focusing on feelings of comfort and relaxation in all the muscles of that area.
- Meditation—This is a form of relaxation that has been practiced in many cultures for centuries. It involves resting in a comfortable position in a relatively distraction-free environment and focusing your attention on only one thing.

- Imagery or visualization—This involves relaxing while using your imagination to create a visual image of a relaxing, soothing place or thing. Every element in this image—sight, sound, action and texture—is imagined to make it as real as possible.
- Autogenics—This technique uses verbal commands to lead your body to a more relaxed state. Repeated words or phrases focus on the specific physical responses associated with relaxation.
- Self-hypnosis—Hypnosis is a deep state of relaxation in which thoughts, suggestions and images can be experienced as real. During self-hypnosis, the body is deeply relaxed and the mind is narrowly focused.
- Biofeedback—This uses instruments to monitor and give feedback on physiological responses during relaxation. Biofeedback does not make you relax—it simply helps provide information about what your body is doing.

When to relax

You may want to take a relaxation break whenever you become aware of any of the following stress-related symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Decreased concentration
- Stiff or aching muscles
- Increased irritability or impatience
- Headache
- “Mental overload”

It’s natural at first to have difficulty refocusing your thoughts. For most of us, relaxation is a skill that takes practice. When you’re learning, try practicing at a time when you’re relatively calm and free of major

distractions. When distractions do creep in, tell yourself to put them gently aside until your relaxation time is over—you will be better able to handle them afterwards.

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