

Relaxation: Benefits & Tips for Acute Pain

The goal of relaxation is to reduce the effects of stress on your health. Since acute pain produces stress on the body, it is important to regularly practice relaxation techniques that can help your mind and body recover. Relaxation is more than resting or enjoying a hobby; it involves using specific strategies to reduce tension.

Benefits of Relaxation

Relaxation is important for good health. When you are relaxed, your muscles are loose, your heart rate is lower, and your breathing is slow and deep. Learning how to relax can help especially when you feel pain.

Relaxation can be helpful during the healing process of injury when you experience acute pain. Relaxation does not cure pain, but skills that relax the body and the mind may help decrease muscle tension, prevent muscle spasms, and relieve the stress that can aggravate pain and other symptoms.

Taking time to relax and refuel your energy provides benefits such as:

- Improved mood and self-confidence
- Increased energy and productivity, and ability to handle problems
- Improved concentration and focus
- Improved sense of control over stress and daily demands
- Improved nighttime sleep
- Increased blood flow to muscles and reduced muscle tension
- Lower blood pressure, breathing rate, and heart rate
- Decreased pain

Relaxation Practice Tips

Relaxation is a skill that requires practice. You may not feel the benefits immediately, so don't give up! Remain patient and motivated and you'll reduce the negative impacts of stress. And remember: If relaxation feels foreign or unnatural, that likely means you are a person who needs it most!

Establish a routine

1. Set aside time to practice relaxation at least once or twice a day. Pairing relaxation with a regular activity may help you remember to practice (for example, take ten relaxed breaths before bed or whenever you sit down to eat).
2. Practice at various times throughout the day until relaxation becomes natural and you can use it readily when you feel stressed. You may want to leave

"reminders" for yourself to relax (for example, sticky notes on the bathroom mirror, kitchen cabinets, or car dashboard with the words "relax" or "breathe").

Be comfortable

1. Practice on a comfortable chair, sofa, mat, or bed. Dim the lights.
2. Loosen tight clothing and remove shoes, belt, glasses or contact lenses, if you like.

Concentrate

1. Eliminate disruptions. Turn off the TV, radio, or telephone.
2. Practice in a quiet, calm, environment.
3. Close your eyes to reduce distractions and improve concentration. If you prefer, keep your eyes open and focus on one spot.
4. Move your body as little as possible, changing positions only for comfort. Don't worry if you have some distracting thoughts—it happens to everyone. Just notice that your thoughts have wandered and then gently, without judgment, return your attention to your breath.

Relax

1. Begin and end relaxation practices with relaxed breathing techniques.
2. Use a relaxation recording if it helps. Gradually, learn to relax without a recording so that you can use relaxation techniques anywhere.
3. Let relaxation proceed naturally and spread throughout your body. Do not try to resist.

Be patient

1. Give yourself time to learn relaxation skills. Practice is required for these techniques to become automatic.
2. Try not to become upset if you have trouble concentrating. A wandering mind is normal and expected. Keep bringing your attention back to your breath.
3. Don't worry about how well you are practicing.
4. After a few weeks, select a word, such as "calm," "relax," "peace," or "patience" that you can say during relaxation practices. Eventually, simply saying that word may help you relax.

Incorporate relaxation into daily life

1. Over time, move relaxation practices from planned, quiet settings to "real life." The goal is to be able to calm yourself when necessary, no matter where you are.
2. Use relaxation whenever you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious, such as waiting in line, at a doctor's appointment, or during a difficult meeting.

Deep Breathing Relaxation for Acute Pain

1. Start by becoming aware of your breathing. Place one hand on your stomach and the other hand on the center of your chest. Without trying to change anything, simply notice how you are breathing. Notice *where* you are breathing from, whether your shoulders are rising and falling, whether your chest is rising and falling, or perhaps your belly is rising and falling. Notice how your hands move as you breathe (PAUSE).
2. Now notice the rate of your breathing. Are you breathing rapidly or slowly? Are you breathing deeply or more shallow? (PAUSE).
3. Now as you slowly inhale, imagine the air flowing deeper into your belly. Feel your belly fill with air as your lower hand rises. Pause at the top of your breath, and then follow your breath out as you completely exhale. Slowly take a breath in, two, three, four, and slowly exhale, two, three, four. Let any tension melt away as you relax more deeply with each breath (PAUSE).
4. Notice how the air feels, as cool fresh air enters your nose, passes through the little hairs in your nasal passage, reaches the back of your throat, and descends deep into your lungs. Notice what happens as that breath of fresh air enters your lungs. Notice what happens when you exhale. Feel the temperature of each breath, cool as you inhale, and warm as you exhale. Count your breaths as you breathe in and out.
5. Notice your breath becoming smooth and slow. Feel your belly and ribcage expand outward with each breath, and feel yourself become more relaxed with each exhale. Allow your shoulders to become heavier with each exhale (PAUSE 15 sec).
6. Continue breathing slowly and gently (PAUSE 15 sec).
7. As you breathe, notice the cool temperature of the air, as it enters your nose or mouth. Notice how the air becomes warmer as you follow it deep into your belly and out through your mouth.
8. Continue breathing slowly and gently (PAUSE 15 sec).
9. Again, slowly take a breath in, two, three, four, and slowly exhale, two, three, four. Feel yourself become more and more relaxed with each exhale. (PAUSE 15 sec).
10. Now, as I count from five to one, feel yourself become more alert. Five, bringing your attention to this room. Four, feeling calm and relaxed. Three, start to wiggle your fingers and toes. Two, slowly start to move and stretch your muscles. One, open your eyes, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Acute Pain

The technique I am going to help you learn is called progressive muscle relaxation. It involves tensing and relaxing muscle groups throughout your body to bring about a state of relaxation. As I ask you to tense your muscles, only tighten them enough to feel some tension—maybe a third to a half of their fully tense state. Make sure you don't strain yourself or hold your breath when you tense your muscles. The goal is to notice what the muscles feel like when they are tense so you can more fully relax them. I'll have you hold the tension for about five seconds and then ask you to relax. Focus on the sensations of letting go of the tension and study the feelings of the muscle being completely relaxed. We'll have you do that for about a minute before moving on to the next muscle group.

Before we begin, get into a comfortable relaxation posture: feet on the floor, legs apart, neck straight, back against your chair, teeth slightly apart, eyes gently closed, and head upright. Take a few slow, deep, comfortable breaths. Breathe in deeply, hold for a moment, and exhale. As you breathe in, concentrate on the sound and feel of the air. As you exhale completely, notice the warmth of the air and silently say the word "calm" to yourself with each breath you let out. Take a few more slow deep breaths. Be sure to exhale slowly and completely each time. Imagine your body becoming more relaxed and feeling heavier in your chair each time you exhale. [Pause.]

Now we'll begin the progressive muscle relaxation. First, we'll start with your **legs**. Lift your legs slightly off the ground, tense your thighs, and point your toes toward your head. Hold that position and feel the tension. Now let your legs drop to the ground and release all the tension at once. Notice the difference between the way your legs feel now when relaxed and how they felt when they were tense.

Now we will move to your **arms**. With your palms facing the ceiling, make a fist and raise your forearm bringing your fist as close to your shoulder as you can while at the same time pressing

your arms to your sides. Feel the tension in your fingers, hands, and arms. And now relax. As you relax you may notice your arms feel warm and heavy. Notice the difference between the relaxation and tension in your arms. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply.

While your legs and arms remain relaxed, we will now move to your **shoulders and stomach**. Lift both shoulders as if you were trying to touch your ears with them and at the same time suck your stomach in as if someone were pushing on it. Feel the tightness and tension across both shoulders and in your stomach muscles and hold it. And now relax. Let your shoulders fall back down and enjoy the heaviness, warmth, and relaxation in your shoulders.

Continue to breathe slowly and deeply, and scan your legs, arms, and shoulders, releasing any excess tension you notice. Focus on the sensation of relaxation in these areas. We'll now move to your **face and neck**. To tense your neck, press your chin to your chest or the back of your head to the back of your chair. While doing this, squint your eyes and slightly bring your back teeth together, tensing just enough to feel the muscles in your jaw. Notice the tension in your face and neck: hold it. And now relax. Let all the tension go from your face and neck.

Continue to breathe slowly and enjoy the relaxed feelings throughout your entire body. Scan your body from your head to your toes and notice what your muscles feel like. As you are doing this, take five more slow deep breaths at your own pace. After you exhale on the last breath, open your eyes.

Relaxation Practice Record for Acute Pain

Use this record to chart your relaxation practice over time. Before you begin your practice, use the scale below to rate your level of tension. After you complete the practice, use the same scale again to rate your level of tension. Note any differences. Remember, it may take a number of practice periods before you notice improvement.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Totally Relaxed		Very Relaxed		Slightly Relaxed		Slightly Tense		Moderately Tense		Extremely Tense

Date	How long did you practice? (minutes)	Level of tension before practice (0-10)	Level of tension after practice (0-10)

