

Stress/Anxiety Relief

*Stress: A mentally or emotionally disruptive or disquieting influence; (American Heritage Dictionary)

*Worries, pressure, fear and disappointment, each may cause stress. Stress fuels anxiety, and anxiety brings about higher levels of stress.

*Stress-related anxiety is unpleasant and makes a bad situation feel much worse. The physical symptoms may also increase the anxiety.

*The body responds to stress/anxiety in many uncomfortable ways including: increased heart rate and blood pressure, nausea and digestion problems, rapid and shallow breathing, sleep problems, dizziness, etc. With extensive stress, there is often an effect on our thinking as well, including: focusing on the worst, blaming ourselves, shorter tempers, lowered self-esteem, fear of losing control, etc.

*Acute anxiety is the "fight or flight" reaction which is an adrenaline rush, and when it's activated in response to a real threat it's a natural, healthy, and helpful thing to have happen. With no threat, it just feels bad. It won't kill you, but it may feel like it sometimes. Remember, anxiety won't hurt you physically. You will not pass out or lose control of yourself. It will eventually pass by itself. But, amazingly....

*The body's responses to stress/anxiety can be controlled by thought with effort and practice! A state of deep relaxation competes with the body's responses to stress/anxiety, and deep relaxation with deep, rhythmical breathing can ease the physical symptoms. In turn, with a calm body, it's easier to calm the mind. It does take effort at first, but it gets easier with practice!

*Two methods have been used successfully for years to control stress and anxiety: Abdominal (Deep) Breathing and Progressive Muscle Relaxation. They are both "all natural" techniques. Anyone can do them with very little training and anyone can use them at anytime to combat stress and anxiety! Both are easy to learn and to do! You only need to invest time in practicing them. The more you do them, the better. As you continue to practice, you'll find that you'll get to a deeper state of relaxation more quickly, and be able to do so across an increasing variety of situations.

Abdominal (Deep) Breathing

*A deep feeling of relaxation is not compatible with stress/anxiety and therefore, if you relax your mind/body you'll reduce stress/anxiety.

* When we get stressed and anxious, we increase our breathing rate. However, we tend to breathe into our upper rather than our lower lungs, and so we breathe more shallowly at the same time. The result is a subtle state of hyperventilation that has not-so-subtle physical effects. Without good oxygen exchange, carbon dioxide builds up in our blood causing an increase in physical symptoms (e.g., increased heart rate).

*Goal: Learn to breathe very deeply into the lungs, completely filling them in a controlled, sustained, stable pattern. This is very important.

*Breathe in through the nose, slowly, filling the lungs from the bottom to the top. Place one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest, to gauge your breathing. The chest should remain relatively still as the stomach rises quite a bit. The bottom of the lungs is where gas exchange is most efficient. We have all learned to breathe into our upper lungs; you will want to change this dramatically.

*Hold your breath as long as it's comfortable.

*Exhale through the mouth in a slow and controlled fashion for as long as (or longer than) your inhalation. (The "in the nose, out the mouth method" helps to clean your air, warm it up to body temperature and you'll learn better breathing control).

*When you finish breathing out, pull in on your diaphragm (your abdomen) to expel the last bit of stale air.

*Count a steady pace to yourself. Count to 5 breathing in, and hold for 2, then breathe out for a count of 6. Hold the air out for a count of 2, then repeat the process over and over. Increase your counts by 1 each day as you practice, until you can breathe slowly, completely and comfortably.

*Focus your concentration and thoughts only on your breathing. This will take your mind off of stress/anxiety.

*Do this daily for as long as possible, and when ever you feel yourself becoming stressed or anxious. No one's likely to notice your stomach moving when you breathe deeply...and if they do, teach them how to breathe correctly!

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

*When progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is consciously paired with abdominal (deep) breathing, there are virtually no immediate stress/anxiety symptoms that you can't eventually overcome quickly, by yourself. Practice makes it happen!

*Our muscles always hold some level of tension while we're awake. Consciously tensing all our muscle groups, holding them tight and then letting them go, brings on sensations of physical relaxation.

*For PMR, find a quiet, darkened place (if possible) and sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Give yourself permission to really relax. This is great to do before going to sleep at night.

*Start out first with a few minutes of abdominal (deep) breathing.

*Think of each muscle group from toe to head (e.g., feet, calves/thighs, buttocks, stomach, lower/upper back, chest, shoulders, hands, forearms/arms, neck, head/face, etc.). Gauge the tension level.

*Concentrate on one group at a time (feet first) and tense the muscles tightly as you inhale (Be gentle with the back if you've got problems with it!). Hold the clenched muscles with the breath. Say to yourself "RELAX" and release the muscles as you release the breath. Follow a stable pattern of breathing/muscle tensing, like with deep breathing.

*Systematically tense and release each muscle group along with your breathing patterns. Do this all the way up the body to the head/face.

*As you relax, you may feel sensations in your muscles (e.g., tingling, temperature or weight change) or see spots of color after you tense the facial muscles. These are normal sensations and they will pass.

*Relaxing at will is a skill! This process takes time at first, but eventually you'll be able to just think the cue word "RELAX" and you'll feel your body respond. The more you practice the better you get at it! Mind/body control can reduce your stress if you learn how to use it properly! You can also see a therapist to learn more skills such as visualization and self-hypnosis. But, most people who take learning them seriously find these two techniques to be very effective.

How To Manage Stress & Anxiety

By Chris S. Dula, PhD

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