

STRESS MANAGEMENT EXERCISES: Breathing



Mini-Breathing Exercises

The following exercises are designed to help reduce anxiety and tension.

Try one when you are feeling stressed or when:

- You are stuck in traffic
- You are stressed at work
- You cannot sleep
- Someone says something that bothers you
- You feel overwhelmed by what you need to accomplish
- You are nervous before a presentation or a meeting
- You are at the doctor or dentist's office

Close your eyes, if you are able and comfortable doing so, or cast them downward several feet in front of you. Inhale slowly through your nose, filling your belly and then your chest with a deep breath. Exhale slowly through your mouth and feel the air leave your chest and then your belly. Do this several times and try these variations.

Exercise 1: Count very slowly to yourself from ten down to zero, one number for each breath. Thus, with the first complete inhalation and exhalation, you say “ten” to yourself, with the next, “nine,” etc. Repeat as necessary.

Exercise 2: As you inhale, say to yourself, “one, two, three, four”. As you exhale, say, “four, three, two, one.” Do this several times.

Exercise 3: After you inhale, pause for a few seconds. After you exhale, pause again for a few seconds. Do this several times.

Exercise 4: After each inhalation and exhalation, say to yourself, “I am relaxed.” You may use any word or phrase that is meaningful to you. Repeat several times.

Instant Calm At Work

If you are being thrown into a state of panic by an approaching deadline or another issue, make a conscious effort to calm down. Instruct yourself to stop, then close your eyes and breathe slowly and deeply. Feel yourself becoming more relaxed; notice your heartbeat slowing down.

If overwhelmed: Accept that you cannot do everything at once. Focus on one task at a time. Bring your mind back gently to the task at hand instead of worrying about the other things that still need to be done. Use all your senses to notice the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future.

For assistance with stress management or other life areas,
call your Employee Assistance Program. We'll be glad to help!

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STRESS MANAGEMENT EXERCISES: PMR



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) was developed by Dr. Edmund Jacobson more than 50 years ago. It is a systematic approach to reducing muscle tension, and can be a very effective relaxation technique for people who have trouble with the more “meditative” approaches.

To practice PMR, sit comfortably in a quiet space. Loosen any tight or uncomfortable clothing. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. What you will be doing is taking a “tour” of your body—first tightening and then releasing a number of different muscle groups.

When you tense a muscle group, squeeze the muscles in that part of your body as tightly as you can and hold that tension for the count of five. Then let the tension go. Every time you release a tense muscle group, take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and then—as you exhale—say “relax” slowly and silently to yourself. Notice that you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable. Then move on to the second muscle group.

1. Tighten all the muscles in your lower legs and feet. Curl your toes toward your feet and tighten the muscles in your calves. Really squeeze and feel all the tension—especially around your toes and in your calves. Hold it for the count of five. Then, let your feet and lower legs relax. Take a deep breath—hold it for a few seconds—and as you exhale, say “relax” to yourself. Really draw it out. Feel the relaxation in your toes, feet, and lower legs. Notice you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable.
2. Then, move up to your buttocks, hips, and thighs. Clench your thighs, tighten your buttocks and hips. Really feel the tension in this entire area of your body. Then release it. Take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, and as you exhale, say “relax.” Notice you are warm, relaxed, and comfortable.
3. Work your way up to your head, tensing and releasing the muscles in your:
 - Feet and lower legs
 - Thighs, hips, and buttocks
 - Abdomen and lower back
 - Chest and upper back
 - Hands and arms
 - Shoulders
 - Face and scalp

Remember to take a deep breath in and out after each tensing-and-releasing cycle.

It will take practice to fully master this relaxation technique, but once you have it down, you’ll be able to do quick body scans throughout the day, tensing and relaxing an individual group of muscles whenever you find a tight spot.

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