

Relaxation Training Overview

Relaxation training is part of training your Me noticing ability. It involves several exercises that can generate relaxation throughout your mind and body. The exercises are based on the scientifically supported mind-body practices of progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and the relaxation response.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing muscles for a few seconds and then relaxing them (Jacobson, 1977). Tensing and relaxing different muscles throughout your body can lead to noticing the difference between the sensation of tension when tensing a muscle and relaxation when letting go of tensing the muscle.

Progressive muscle relaxation has been shown to improve numerous conditions, such as hypertension, stress, anxiety, back pain and muscular tension, depression, negative emotions, fatigue, insomnia, and headaches (Carlson & Hoyle, 1993). It has also been shown, for example, to increase calmness, concentration, mental clarity, restful sleep, quality of life, coping in the workplace, and feelings of peace.

Autogenic Training

Autogenic training involves using body-oriented verbal directives to activate your body's natural repair and regulation mechanism (Sadigh, 2019). The training teaches your body to respond to your commands to self-produce bodily sensations and perceptions, such as the heaviness and warmth of your arms, legs, and belly. The benefits of this brain-directed, self-regulatory process involving affirming these verbal directives can include (Stetter & Kupper, 2002):

- Improved sleep
- Increased mind and body relaxation
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- Increased efficiency in work
- Reduced fatigue, anxiety, and muscle tension

The Relaxation Response

The relaxation response involves repeating a sound, word, phrase, or prayer silently or aloud to elicit relaxation (Benson, 1979; Benson Klipper, 2000). A word might be love, peace, or calm. A phrase might be something you learned in childhood that gives rise to feeling relaxed and secure, such as when you were in the presence of loving parents and family. A sound like “Ohm” might work for you. You might repeat the Hail Mary or Our Father prayer if you're Catholic. The key is to repeat something meaningful to you to evoke a relaxation response.

You can even elicit relaxation during muscular activity. If you're jogging, pay attention to the cadence of your feet—left, right, left, right. Or pay attention to the rhythm of your breathing during any muscular activity.

The relaxation response has been shown to counteract the harmful effects of stress, anxiety, anger, hostility, depression, pain, insomnia, and many other stress-related conditions, including hypertension (Benson, 1979; Benson Klipper, 2000). Physiologic benefits of the relaxation response can include:

- Lower oxygen consumption, blood lactate associated with anxiety, heart rate, and respiration
- Higher levels of alpha waves, slow brain waves that indicate a restful state, or decreased sympathetic nervous system activity

Summary

To sum up, all the relaxation exercises in the training focus on releasing stress and tension, calming the autonomic nervous system, and balancing essential brain mechanisms associated with rest and relaxation.

Four essential ingredients shared among the relaxation exercises are allowing inevitable thoughts and feelings to show up as they are, without any effort to change or move away from them; returning to the exercise; allowing your practice to unfold naturally, without striving to achieve a particular result like being relaxed; and practicing every day, a little and often.

Some of the relaxation exercises combine the techniques of progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training, and the relaxation response.

In your practice, experiment to elicit relaxation while sitting, standing, lying down, being in a quiet or noisy place, or doing muscular activities.

In the long run, the benefits of relaxation training can produce a generalization effect. That means the relaxation you experience doing these exercises can extend to the rest of your daily life. The way the generalization effect can impact your everyday life (Miller, 2015):

- The more you practice, the more you feel at ease in your daily interactions with others.
- The more you practice, the more you decrease stress and tension.
- The more you practice, the more you increase restful sleep.
- The more you practice, the more you increase your mental clarity and ability to respond effectively instead of mindlessly reacting.

Exercise Tips

Body Sensing

- As you learn the skill and with regular practice, you might find that it takes only a few minutes to experience relaxation.
- Practice regularly to eventually perform the exercise without listening to the recording.
- It is best to find a quiet and comfortable place to practice.
- Sit in a chair or lie down on the floor. Get into a comfortable position. When lying down, place a pillow under your knees to help relax your lower back, and put a pillow under your neck to support it.
- Loosen any tight clothing. Take off your shoes, watch, glasses, contact lenses, and jewelry whenever possible.
- Maintain your focus on the bodily sensations throughout the exercise. It is normal for your mind to wander away to other things during the training. If it does, bring your attention back to focusing on bodily sensations. If your mind wanders away one hundred times, bring your attention back one hundred times.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Tighten each muscle group for about 5 to 10 seconds without straining. Focus on the buildup of tension and sensation.
- For each muscle group, release all tension for about 10 to 20 seconds. Notice the difference between the sensation of relaxation when letting go of tensing a muscle and the feeling of pressure when tensing a muscle.
- Keep all your other muscles relaxed when you're tensing a muscle group.
- Remember to breathe when you're tensing and holding a muscle group.

Autogenic Exercises

- In the training, we'll give you some phrases to say silently five times each. Your attitude as you do this is important. This is the kind of training where the more you try to relax, the less it will happen. So, the best approach is to have the intention to relax but remain detached from any results. It's only a matter of time until you feel relaxed.
- Saying the phrases is helpful because it keeps them in mind, but it might not be enough. The part of the brain that controls relaxation, the limbic system, doesn't understand language very well. So, if you want, you can translate the content of the phrase into an image. For example, you'll learn one of the phrases: "My left leg is heavy and warm." You may imagine a warm blanket wrapped around your leg. Use whatever works for you as a relaxing image, but the image itself is unimportant.

Music and Sounds

Listening to music or serene nature sounds during relaxation exercises can significantly aid in balancing the autonomic nervous system. These soothing sounds help to activate the parasympathetic branch, which promotes relaxation and recovery by lowering heart rate, reducing blood pressure, and calming the mind. This relaxation response counters the

overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, which is often triggered by stress, helping to restore equilibrium between the two branches and fostering overall nervous system balance.

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