

Relaxation Strategies



AESC
Academic Enrichment
& Support Center

◆ Mini Relaxation Strategies

These exercises are designed to help you learn to let yourself relax--to un-stress.

Here are four steps you are encouraged to follow in choosing your particular combination of mini relaxation strategies:

- As you read further in this section, try each technique as you read about it. Read through the description of the exercise. Then try it! See how it "fits."
 - On a 3" x 5" card (or something you can slip into a pocket or purse) list each of the techniques. Use just a title or enough of a phrase to help you remember the exercise.
 - Try out two or three strategies several times each day. Do this for a week or for long enough to get a feeling for which ones seem most helpful to you--long enough to choose your own particular strategies. Then, use the ones you select.
1. **Deep Breath.** Take a deep breath. Hold it for about 3 seconds. Then let it out all at once (with a sigh if you want). As you let it out, let your jaw relax, your shoulders relax and think "calm." Let your teeth remain slightly apart (we should go through the day with enough space between our front teeth for a small pencil).
 2. **Tense-Release.** Tense yourself all over, one part at a time. Pull your toes up as if to touch your shins and hold it. Tense your thigh muscles... your buttocks...tense your fists and your arms...take a deep breath and hold it. Clench your jaws and close your eyelids tight. Hold yourself tense all over for four or five seconds...then let go all at once. Don't ease off, let go. Feel the tension leave your body.
 3. **Cool Air In, Warm Air Out.** With your eyes closed, shift your attention to the tip of your nose. As you breath in, become aware of the air coming in your nostrils. As you breathe out, be aware of the sensations of the air passing back out. Perhaps you notice that the air coming in tends to be cooler and the air you breathe out tends to be warmer. Just be aware of cool air in; warm air out.
 4. **Heavy Feet.** Just imagine that your feet and legs are getting heavier and heavier with each breath out. It's almost as if you are wearing lead boots. My feet are heavy. My feet are heavy. Just imagine this for a few seconds. Or perhaps some other part of your body works for you.
 5. **Hands Warm.** Visualize your hands as warm, relaxed and warm. You might imagine them in a bucket of warm water, near a fire or in warm, woolly gloves. Perhaps you can even begin to feel the blood flowing down your arms into your hands. Hands are warm... relaxed and warm.
 6. **Breathing Tensions Away.** Gently focus your attention on your feet. As you take in a slow, deep breath, imagine collecting all the tensions in your feet and legs, breathing them into your lungs and expelling them as you exhale. Then with a second deep breath, all the tensions in your trunk, hand and arms--expel that. With a third one, collect and expel all those in your shoulders, neck and head. With practice, some persons are able to collect tensions in the entire body in one deep inhalation.

7. **Equalized Breathing.** Take 4 seconds to breathe in and 4 seconds to breathe out. That is as you inhale, count "1 one-thousand, 2 one-thousand, 3 one-thousand, 4 one-thousand." And as you breathe out, count similarly. Do this 4 or 5 times.
8. **Abdominal (Diaphragmatic) Breathing.** Put one hand on your chest and the other hand on your navel ("belly button"). Now, breathe so that only the hand on your navel moves--as you breathe in, the hand moves out and moves in as you exhale. The upper hand on your chest does not move. Watch them as you breathe and see if you can breathe with only the lower hand moving.
9. **Ideal Relaxation.** With your eyes closed, take a moment to create, in your mind's eye, an ideal spot for relaxation. You can make it any place real or imagined. (Mine is down an escalator and into a room with a super comfortable, overstuffed chair with walls and ceiling lined with a calming rug-like material and favorite music playing.) See yourself in comfortable clothes. Now, once you have created it, go back there for 15 seconds or so--whenever you feel the need to relax.
10. **4S*--The Ultimate Mini Relaxation.** First, smile and make your eyes sparkle. Yes, you can do it. Smile and make your eyes sparkle. Then take a deep breath. As you let it out, let your jaw hang slack, shoulders sag, and forehead smooth out. Go ahead, do it again: Smile with sparkling eyes, deep breath, let it out and feel your jaw go slack, shoulders sag, forehead smooth out.

***4S= Smile, Slack, Sag, Smooth**

There's a reason for each of these parts. As we get tense, our facial muscles tend to get tense and "hard-looking." Smiling breaks that up--its difficult to remain as stressed after smiling. Deep breathe to counteract all the shallow breathing already mentioned. We tend to tense our jaws when stressed, so letting it hang slack lets go of some of that stress. The same with our shoulders--up and tense with stress, so letting them go and relax lets go of the stress. And, letting our forehead smooth out releases the tension we tend to gather there when we frown or wrinkle our forehead.

◆ **Mini Stretching Strategies**

Short and quick stretches are another way of letting go of extra tension and helping our body return to its more natural, less stressed state. You already have practiced a few of these mini stretches as described in the boxes in Chapter 1. These and others will be described below. In deciding which ones are most helpful for you, follow the same 4-step routine suggested for choosing mini relaxation techniques.

A word of caution.

- Those of you who have neck or back problems, follow your doctor's orders in using or modifying these stretches.
- For all of you, **stretches should be gentle**, no pain. When you stretch, do so just until you feel your muscles beginning to stretch comfortably and just a very little beyond. Hold briefly, then let go. The old saying "no pain, no gain" is wrong and can cause problems.

Also, while doing all of these stretches, let your jaw hang slack and keep breathing easily. A natural response is to hold our breath and clench our jaw when doing something such as this. But both of these raise the stress level. So, jaw relaxed, breathing easily.

1. **Gentle Head Rolls.** Gently roll your head in a circle about 3 times around to the right and 3 times to the left. The axis where your head sits on your neck is to be treated with care. So, roll slowly and gently. If you hear your muscles and bones cracking or popping while doing this, ease off.
2. **Shoulder Roll.** Raise your shoulders as if trying to touch your ears with them. Then, move your

shoulders back; then let them drop. Up, back, down and around. Do about 5 of these. Some people find this more helpful if the shoulders are rolled forward rather than backward. Experiment to see what works best for you. Keep your jaw relaxed and breathe easily while doing these.

3. **Arms Up and Back**. Put your arms up over your head and interlace your fingers. Now turn your palms toward the ceiling and include two moves; push up toward the ceiling and push your arms lightly back. Feel the stretch in your upper arms, shoulders and upper back.
4. **Stand and Reach**. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart. Put your arms up over your head and interlace your fingers. Turn your palms toward the ceiling and stretch, trying to reach the ceiling. On your toes and stretch. Now, holding your arms and hands the same way, lean to your left until you feel a good stretch up your right side; hold it for 5 seconds. Then lean to your right, feel the stretch and hold. Now, lean forward and reach and hold. Then just hang towards the floor, letting all your muscles loose. Bend your knees as you straighten up (to ease the strain on your lower back).
5. **Arm Pull**. This can be done either sitting or standing. Stretch your right arm up over your head, then reach down towards your left shoulder. With your left hand, grasp your right elbow and gently pull your right arm down. Hold. Then reverse.
6. **Desk Stretch**. Slide your chair back from the desk far enough so that when you lean forward your head is just short of the desk. Then put your arms on the desk with elbows just off it. Lean forward with your head below the desk and feel the upper arm, shoulders and upper back stretch.
7. **Sitting Side Bender**. Interlace your fingers behind your neck so both elbows are sticking out to the side. Gently lean to your left; back to your right. Do this three or four times, feeling your neck, sides and lower back stretch.
8. **Squat**. Stand with your feet about shoulder width apart, toes pointed out slightly. Now, while keeping you heels on the ground, bend your knees and squat. If you have difficulty holding the position, grab onto something in front of you. Hold for a few seconds. Good for the lower back, groin, ankles and Achilles' tendons.
9. **Doorway Shoulder Stretch**. Stand just through a doorway. Reach back with your arm and grasp the doorway with your hands about shoulder height. Gently lean forward and hold a few seconds. Feel your shoulders and upper arms stretch.
10. **Arms Behind the Back**. While standing with feet about shoulder width apart, reach behind your back and interlace your fingers. Now gently raise your arms (while keeping your hands locked together) until you feel the stretch up your arms and upper back. A variation--with your fingers interlaced behind you, turn your hands so the palms are facing down and straighten out you arms. Feel the upper back and arms stretch.
11. **Sitting Twist**. This is more than a mini. It is included because it stretches all three of the critical areas. You can do it during the day if you have an extended break and a soft floor. Otherwise do it while watching TV in the evening.

Sitting on the floor with your legs stretched out in front of you, feet straight up . Now, 1) take your right foot and place it outside your left knee, 2) your right hand and place it behind your right buttock, 3) reach over your right knee with your left arm so your left elbow is outside your right knee, and 4) turn and look over your right shoulder. Feel the stretch in your lower back, upper back, neck and hamstring. Then repeat everything to the left.