

RELAXATION THREE WAYS

DEEP BREATHING, MEDITATION, AND MUSCLE RELAXATION

Students will:

- Learn and practice three relaxation techniques.
- Understand the purpose of each technique.
- Compare the relative benefits of the three techniques.

Reasonable space and moveable chairs; optional soft instrumental music

The essence of stress reduction is relaxation. You can repeatedly urge mindfulness and relaxation, explaining in detail their value, but until you actually *teach* and *routinely practice* methods to accomplish these objectives — prior to tests, following breaks, as transitions from active to quiet tasks — nothing much will change.

Below are three distinct methods of achieving relaxation. Each is simple, easy to learn, and effective. The key to success is repetition. Have your students practice one or more of these exercises regularly. Make relaxation part of their routine.

DEEP BREATHING

The simplest, most direct route to relaxation is that of deep breathing. Explain to the students that when they are tense, nervous, angry, or excited, their breathing becomes more rapid. Deliberately slowing and controlling the depth and rate of their breathing can help them to calm down and feel more relaxed.

Read the directions slowly, progressing from chest to abdominal (belly) breathing and then combining the movements in one slow, continuous four-count exercise.

Chest-breathing

1. Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Inhale and exhale deeply through your nose three times.
3. Place your left hand on your stomach, just below your ribs. Place your right hand on your chest.

1. Breathe normally and notice where your breath is coming from.
2. Now take a long, slow, deep breath into your chest. Your right hand will rise while your left hand remains fairly still.
3. Pause briefly, keeping your chest full, then exhale slowly through your nose.
4. Repeat this “chest breathing” three times.
5. Breathe in, hold, release... breathe in, hold, release... breathe in, hold, release.
6. Breathe normally.

Belly-breathing

1. Now, take a long, slow deep breath into your stomach. Your left hand will rise, while your right hand remains fairly still.
2. Pause briefly, feeling your stomach muscles push up, then exhale slowly through your nose.
3. Repeat this “belly breathing” three times.
4. Breathe in, hold, release... breathe in, hold, release... breathe in, hold, release.
5. Breathe normally.

Combined chest-belly breathing

1. Count one: breathe into your belly (left hand rises)
2. Count two: breathe into your chest (right hand rises)
3. Count three: Exhale from your belly (left hand lowers)
4. Count four: Exhale from your chest (right hand lowers)
5. Pause.
6. Repeat: one... two... three... four...
7. Continue for 2-3 minutes.

5-MINUTE MEDITATION

Explain to the students that the purpose of meditation is to relax the body and quiet the mind. Point out that our bodies are usually active and moving. Even while sitting, we tend to shift, turn, and twitch. Similarly, our minds never stop producing thoughts, not even during sleep. By sitting quietly for a few minutes while breathing naturally and focusing all of our attention on a particular sound, we can calm both mind and body.

In this exercise the students will focus on the sound of their own voice counting from one to four. Have the students move their chairs to create maximum distance from one another. If possible, they should face blank walls, or at least face away from other students. A circle, with everyone turned to face out, works well. Tell the students to count very quietly, just above a whisper.

Slowly read these directions:

1. Sit straight in your chair. Fold your hands in your lap or rest them on your thighs.
2. Look down slightly with your eyes, keeping your head straight.
3. Sit quietly and try not to move. Breathe naturally.

Pause briefly, then continue...

4. Focus your attention on your breathing.
5. Silently count “one” as you inhale. Count “two” as you exhale. Count “three” as you inhale. Count “four” as you exhale.
6. Continue breathing in and out with each count up to ten.
7. Start over, breathing and counting up to ten.
8. Concentrate on the sound of your own voice counting. If other thoughts enter your mind, that’s okay. Just let them pass and go back to focusing on your voice.
9. Continue for 5 minutes.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

One of the best ways to differentiate a tense muscle from a relaxed one, thereby guaranteeing relaxation, is to first exaggerate the tension. Progressive muscle relaxation helps students feel the difference by tensing and relaxing one muscle group at a time, from toe to head. As you read the directions, exaggerate your inflexion to convey the alternate sensations of tension and relaxation. Play the role of coach.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Breathe naturally.
2. Think about each set of muscles as I tell you to tense and hold for 5 seconds. Try to move only the muscles I tell you to move, keeping the rest of your body still. Notice how it feels. Then notice the difference when I tell you to relax those muscles.
3. Tense your toes by flexing them as though you were standing on tiptoe. Hold. Relax.
4. Flex your ankles and move them around in circles. Flex again. Hold. Relax.
5. Tense and stretch your calf muscles by pushing hard with your heels. Hold. Relax.
6. Tense the large muscles in your thighs. Hold. Relax.
7. Tense your hip and buttocks muscles. Feel your hips lift. Hold. Relax.
8. Tense your abdominal muscles. Feel them tighten. Hold. Relax.
9. Tense your stomach muscles. Suck them in as tightly as you can. Hold. Relax.
10. Make tight fists with your fingers. Tighter. Hold. Relax.
11. Flex your wrists. Make circles with your wrists. Flex again. Hold. Relax.

1. Tense the muscles in your arms. Make your arms as stiff as boards. Hold. Relax.
2. Tense your shoulder muscles. Hunch your shoulders up to your ears. Hold. Relax.
3. Tense your neck by touching your chin to your collarbone. Hold. Relax.
4. Turn your neck as far as it will go to the right. Hold. Relax.
5. Turn your neck as far as it will go to the left. Hold. Relax.
6. Scrunch all the muscles of your face as tightly as you can. Hold. Relax.
7. Now tense your whole body, starting with your toes all the way up to your face. Hold. Relax.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the three relaxation exercises did you like best? Why?
2. Which exercise was most effective in helping you to relax?
3. Which exercise are you most apt to use on your own?
4. During the meditation, how difficult was it to concentrate on counting?
5. During the muscle relaxation exercise, where did you feel the most tension?
6. During what part of your day are you usually very relaxed? When are you usually very tense?
7. Which of these techniques could you use to relax during the tense part of your day?