

How Important Is Relaxation?

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Perhaps you're wondering why something as seemingly simple as relaxation merits its own chapter. If you take a brief moment to turn your attention to your body, you'll find your answer. Before reading further, notice how tense your shoulders are. If the tightness isn't immediately apparent, take one long, deep breath, and as you exhale, allow the tops of your shoulders to drop and your arms to go limp.

Did you feel the difference? Repeat a couple more times. It's surprising how much deeper you will fall into rest each time your breath is released.

Next, notice your face. Chances are your forehead is slightly scrunched, your teeth are clenched, or your eyes are squinted. Relax the muscles in your face, as if they're melting or drooping toward the floor. This

simple exercise displays but a glimpse of the rigid state your body holds every waking moment.

Think about how you carry yourself throughout the day. Are you one of the countless people who suck your stomach in while in public to appear thinner? Do you broaden your shoulders to appear brawnier? Does your posture create tension in your neck, back, and/or shoulders? If you think re

laxation is something that comes easily, you're about to learn how elusive restfulness and living in a relaxed state can actually be.

Relaxation gets its own chapter for a few reasons:

Staying relaxed physically is crucial to mental health.

Staying relaxed mentally is crucial to physical health.

Most people don't realize how tense they are.

Most people don't know how to relax, much less remain in a relaxed state.

The Mind-Body Connection

Mind and body are connected much more than you may realize. Think about something you're afraid of—snakes, spiders, heights, whatever the case may be—and your body will no doubt respond with a cringe, shivers, or

goose bumps. The same goes for recollections of trauma. Reliving the memory of a car wreck can cause your body to reenact, to a lesser degree, the physical strain that occurred during the accident. In much the same way, harboring such bodily tension preserves traumatic memories, as your body reminds your brain of the physical stress you felt. Mind and body go hand in hand. A tense body leads to racing thoughts, and racing thoughts lead to a tense body. Similarly, a relaxed body leads to a relaxed mind, just as a relaxed mind leads to a body at ease.

The Balancing Act

Tranquility isn't something only attained in a hammock, on a beach, or in a fishing boat. Likewise, relaxation won't be found solely in excessive fantasies of exotic destinations. Such reverie alone will only lead to feelings of longing for something out of reach. For genuine relaxation to take hold, your mind and body must work together instead of against each other.

At some point, you've probably said while preparing to head home from a vacation: "Oh well. Time to go back to the real world." But it's incorrect to assume that your vacation was fantasy, or somehow less real. Digging your toes in the sand while sipping an icy drink is just as much reality

as when you punch the time clock, argue with your spouse, or sit across from your counselor. No matter where you are—whether on vacation or in “the real world”—your mind is always capable of stressing you out and hindering relaxation. Physically, you’re always vulnerable, as trouble will follow you wherever you go. If you’re a parent, you know that you can argue with your children just as fervently away from home as you do at home, leaving you feeling like you need a vacation from your vacation.

Perhaps you know what it’s like struggling to relax on a sandy beach because of thoughts about your job and stresses awaiting you at the office. Or, perhaps you have experienced the anguish of joining your family for a photo on the beach. You pull your loved ones close and point a fake smile to the camera, knowing your marriage is failing, and you wonder if this will be the last picture taken of you all together. This goes to show that hell-on-earth can find you anywhere you are, even if you’re vacationing in paradise.

You don’t need a hot tub to relax and be content. You don’t have to be in a pool to enjoy your children. You don’t have to walk hand-in-hand on a shoreline with your wife to show her affection, and you don’t have to go into

debt for a vacation you can't afford to get away from the cares of the world. It's time to throw away any, and all, phony notions of how to relax, and understand that you can reach a deeper level of rest wherever you find yourself at any given moment, a state stronger than you have ever experienced, by simply balancing your mind and body.

How Do I Go About It?

Numerous relaxation techniques exist, and your counselor may have a few tips up his or her sleeve

just for you. In fact, if your counselor notices you displaying a high level of anxiety in a session, he or she may offer to guide you through an exercise. Likewise, if you feel that stress or tension could prevent you from engaging completely in a session, ask your counselor to choose an appropriate relaxation intervention to meet your needs.

Some relaxation techniques require professional guidance, but not all of them. Plenty of do-it-yourself methods exist to allow you to take your tranquility in your own hands. Remember, you are the expert of your own life, and it's up to you to explore what works for your particular tension. To help get you on your way, the remainder of this section contains a handful of

self-help techniques that may increase your serenity by balancing your mind and body.

Deep-breathing exercise. Stress typically affects your breathing, resulting in short, shallow, and erratic breaths, while calm is associated with deep, long, and balanced inhalations and exhalations. Practicing deep breathing is simple and can be done just about anywhere, anytime. When you notice stress in your breathing:

Inhale once deeply, completely filling your lungs.

Let out a large sigh, dropping your chest and shoulders, pushing the air out through pursed lips, and completely emptying your lungs.

This action will help snap you out of your current agitated mental and physical state.

Next, begin breathing deeply. Imagine your belly, around your waistline, as a deep, powerful place.

Focus your concentration on the feeling of your breath flowing in and out.

When you inhale, feel your entire abdomen, sides, and lower back expand.

Notice the subtle pause that occurs just before you exhale.

When you exhale, focus on the sensations that come as your abdomen, sides, and lower back come back to a resting position.

Notice the subtle pause that occurs just before you inhale again.

Repeat this cycle ten times, relaxing your chest and shoulders more fully each time, eventually including your neck, face, and arm muscles.

This exercise offers a perfect example of how balance can be achieved by leading with the body. Focusing your attention on the rhythm of bodily movements that occur during breathing will naturally direct your mind away from your stressor and incite the mind to join up with the body, allowing mind and body to transition together into rest.

A guided deep breathing exercise is available at counselingclient.com.

Since deep breathing can be done just about anywhere, try listening to it whenever you feel tension or anxiety building. Just make sure you do it in a safe location, and please do not listen to it while driving!

Progressive muscle relaxation. This is a two-step process. It involves systematically constricting and relaxing specific muscles groups. Here is a typical way of practicing:

Sit or lie down, and get comfortable.

Take a few moments to relax and breath deeply.

When you feel ready, direct your attention to your right foot, and focus for a few moments on how it feels.

Slowly, tense the muscles in that foot as tightly as you can, and hold for a count of ten.

Completely release the tension in your foot, and focus solely on the tension clearing, and how the foot feels once it is completely limp.

When you're ready, shift your focus to the left foot and repeat the sequence of tension and release.

Continue this way through the entire body. A typical pattern is: (1) right foot, (2) left foot, (3) right calf, (4) left calf, (5) right thigh, (6) left thigh, (7) hips and buttocks, (8) abdomen, (9) chest, (10) back, (11) right arm, (12) left arm, (13) right hand, (14) left hand, (15) neck and shoulders, and (16) face. See Fig. 5.1.

With consistent practice, progressive muscle relaxation reveals the countless sensations that you experience on the continuum between extreme tension and total rest. You also develop an intimate awareness of where and how you hold tension. This understanding will help you notice and reduce the

early signs of muscular tension that accompanies stress. And just as with deep breathing, the body takes the lead with the intent of the mind joining it in deep rest.

A fifteen-minute guided progressive muscle relaxation exercise is available at counselingclient.com. It is recommended that you use these if you're new to the practice. Please, consult with your physician before practicing progressive muscle relaxation if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other injuries that may be heightened by constricting muscles.

Mindfulness meditation. You may be one of the many people who think meditation is something reserved for gurus, Eastern religions, New Agers, or believers of pseudoscience. You may think that meditation involves

twisting your legs in uncomfortable positions, and sitting motionless for hours on end, chanting “oohs,” and “omms,” or even praying to a deity. With mindfulness meditation, all of these assumptions are incorrect. An extended discussion of mindfulness meditation is well beyond the scope of this chapter (For a more detailed description, feel free to read the next chapter, entitled, “What Is Mindfulness?”). It is, however, important to mention mindfulness here because of one of the benefits associated with meditation—deep relaxation. Although, you will learn in the next chapter that meditation is much more than a mere relaxation technique.

You may be wondering: what is “mindfulness meditation”? Let us answer this by breaking the phrase in two: “mindfulness” and “meditation.” Mindfulness can be defined as purposely and non-judgmentally paying attention in the present moment. Essentially, mindfulness is about developing awareness of the present—living fully engaged in each passing moment, accepting things exactly as they are with less criticism. Defining meditation is a little more complicated because so many different types of meditation exist, and so many of them are intended to achieve different goals. All forms of mindf

fulness meditation, however, have one central goal—to foster present moment awareness. If it is helpful, think of mindfulness as a byproduct of meditation, and meditation is a way to generate mindfulness in all areas of your life. Some would even say that any activity that helps you focus on what is happening in the moment—whether in your surroundings and within yourself—could be considered a form of meditation. For you, this may be knitting, swimming, painting, jogging, folding laundry, or washing dishes.

Washing dishes is a wonderful example of how to meditate on something usually considered mundane or bothersome. Next time you do them, step out of your mind, away from the stressful thoughts that haunted your day, and focus instead on the warmth of the water, the smell of the soap, the sound of the dishes clanging against each other, and the sight of flowing water cascading off each dish as you rinse. If you look closely, you may even notice your reflection replicated hundreds of times in each of the tiny bubbles formed by the detergent.

The goal of mindfulness meditation is not to produce a trance-like state where no thinking occurs. Rather, the goal is to pay attention to what is happening—whatever that may be. It may be a sensation in a particular body

part, like pleasure, pain, numbness, or tingling. It may be an emotional feeling, like happiness, sorrow, shame, or boredom. It may be drowsiness, or anxiety. Or, you may pay attention to thoughts that are on your mind. Many of us never relax because we are never aware that we are not relaxed. In a sense, we never pay attention to the fact that we never pay attention, and so we never notice our mind/body imbalance. Mindfulness meditation is important for relaxation because of its amazing ability to balance the body and mind simply by paying attention to the imbalance.

Other methods of meditation will be listed in the next chapter, but one type of meditation, the body scan, is discussed here due to its relaxing qualities. In this particular meditation, the mind takes the

lead by focusing intensely on the body. You will notice that the body scan is similar in practice to progressive muscle relaxation, in that you focus attention on one body part at a time. In the body scan, however, you neither tense nor relax your muscles. You don't try to create any kind of state in your body at all. Instead, you simply observe the body. This concentration soothes the mind, and in turn brings a natural tranquility to the body. Here is how you practice the body scan:

Lie flat on your back or sit up straight in a chair. Your eyes can be opened or closed, which ever seems more appropriate. Allow your arms and legs to fall loosely.

Focus on your breathing at the point of your nostrils or the rising and falling of your abdomen for a couple minutes, or until you feel some of your immediate tension melt away.

Turn your full attention to the toes on you left foot. Notice any sensations. These could include sensations formed by contact with your socks or blanket if you are covered up. Feel the toes touching each other. This may create a tingling sensation. If you feel pain or numbness, don't resist the feeling. Simply observe it just as it is.

As you inhale, imagine your breath traveling from your nose, all the way down to your toes, and then imagine the air flowing back up and out the nose with each exhale. Keep your focus on the toes in this way for one to two minutes.

If your mind wanders, and you lose concentration on the body, that's perfectly fine. Just noticing that you were not aware brings instant awareness. All you have to do is bring your attention back to

the particular body part and resume concentration. If you lose focus 100 times, gently and without judgment bring your attention back to the body 100 times.

Next, move on to the rest of the foot, and offer it the same undivided attention.

Continue this routine of concentration and breathing into each body part. A typical pattern is: (1) left toes (2) left foot, (3) left ankle, (4) left calf, (5) left shin, (6) left knee, (7) left thigh, (8) right toes (9) right foot, (10) right ankle, (11) right calf, (12) right shin, (13) right knee, (14) right thigh (15) hips and buttocks, (16) abdomen, (17) chest, (18) back, (19) left arm, (20) left hand, (21) left fingers, (22) right arm, (23) right hand, (24) right fingers, (25) neck, shoulders, and throat, (26) top of head, and (27) face. See Fig. 5.2.

Once awareness has been brought to the face, draw your attention to your nostrils and focus on the sensations that occur from the act of breathing.

After a few moments, direct your attention to the abundance of sensations occurring throughout the body.

When you are ready, you may conclude by opening your eyes slowly and expanding your awareness to the room around you.

A fifteen-minute guided body scan meditation is available at counselingclient.com. It is recommended that you use an audio recording if you are new to the practice.

One final note on mindfulness: take time throughout each day to snap out of your mind, and pay

attention to what your body is saying in each moment. Where are you tense? Where are you relaxed? Are there times during the day when tension is at its highest point? Are there places you frequent that cause you to tense more than others? If so, you may be able to develop relaxation methods to prepare you before entering into these specific times and places. This will allow you to approach stress with more tranquility and confidence, and less insecurity and desperation. Are there times during the day when you feel at ease and exceptionally relaxed? If so, perhaps you can adjust your schedule to make more time for these things. Investigating and answering these

questions are important steps to understand more about yourself and what you need to take better care of yourself.

Visualization. Visualization, or guided imagery, is a type of meditation that differs from mindfulness. Instead of accepting and bringing awareness to stressful situations, visualization employs fantasy to foster tranquility. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a peaceful scene where you can feel comfortable letting go of tension and anxiety. Your choice of scenery is up to you. Perhaps it is a tropical beach, a spot enjoyed during childhood, a favorite fishing hole, or a field with long, flowing grass. You may choose to do this exercise in silence, or while listening to relaxing music, your counselor's guiding voice during a session, a recording of your counselor, or an audio recording that reflects the scene you are creating in your mind. For example: if you picture yourself in a forest, play a track of forest sounds.

Here is an example of how you might practice visualization of a beach scene at sunset:

Play an audio track of crashing waves if you choose.

Lie flat on the ground or sit up straight in a chair.

Close your eyes, and imagine as vividly as possible the beach scene.

Try to create reactions from all your sense. Listen to the waves.

Look at the purple and orange sky created by the

setting sun, and the seagulls flying overhead. Smell and taste the

salty air. Feel the heavy breeze and the sand between your toes. It

may be difficult for all of your senses to come alive. Take one sense

at a time and see if you can create activity in at least three of your

senses.

Walk up and down the beach. Feel the water rush over your feet.

Look for seashells. Explore what is in your imaginary place, and

allow your body to fall into deep relaxation.

When your mind drifts off, simply return to your scene and allow

your senses to again come to life.

When you are ready, you may conclude by opening your eyes slowly

and expanding your awareness of the room around you. Be careful

that your return to reality does not cause unnecessary feelings of

displeasure or longing to escape. Keep in mind that visualization is

intended to release tension and anxiety, not cause more.

Massage. Often times, excessive tension resides in your muscles, causing aches and pains, tightness, and headaches. If you have the time and money, treating yourself on occasion to a professional massage can work wonders, and leave you in a deep state of relaxation. If your wallet and/or your schedule are just too tight, don't let that stop you from unwinding. You may be surprised at the amount of relief you can experience from simply massaging yourself. After all, you are the expert of your own body, and you know best about where your problem areas reside.

Let's say you feel a tension headache forming in your neck and shoulders. First, take a moment to breathe, relax, and drop your shoulders, just as you did in the exercise at the beginning of this chapter. Once you feel some of the initial rigidity melt away, place your right palm on the right side of

your neck. Likewise, place your left palm on the left side of your neck, and interlock your fingers. In this position, you can squeeze your neck and roll your hands around, discovering and focusing on the areas that seem to need the most attention. Also from this position, try pointing your thumbs straight down, and using them to accurately dig into the strongest tension

areas and/or muscle knots. You will find that your thumbs can make contact all the way from the base of your skull to your shoulder joints. You may try placing your thumbs at the very top of your neck, and then slowly traveling down along the sides of the vertebrae of your neck. As you do this, focus on relaxing the neck and shoulder muscles, and visualize them loosening as your thumbs pass along them. Continue this all the way down the neck and across the tops of the shoulders. Repeat until you feel relief.

This is just one idea, and one area of the body. Remember, you are the expert, so explore where you hold tension and different ways to massage yourself. Other examples may include: soaking your feet in warm water and giving yourself a foot massage at the end of a long, hard day, or rolling your fingers around your temples or forehead when a headache encroaches on your ability to work or socialize. The good news is self-massage can be done just about anywhere, at anytime.

When and Where Should I Relax?

The exercises above are just a handful of ways to go about relaxing. The good news is there's no right or wrong way. It's something you can do whenever and wherever you are. You may assume you need a quiet room,

bubble bath, fishing boat, etc., but saying you need those things is like saying you have to have a gym membership and personal trainer to exercise. You don't. You just have to be creative with your commitment to calm yourself when you feel you need it.

No matter where you are, you can always find a relaxation technique that will work for your situation. You can practice deep breathing while sitting at your desk. You can give yourself a massage w

hile sitting in traffic. You can practice being mindful wherever you are: driving, walking, or waiting in line. No matter how or where you go about it, the key is separating yourself from anxiety and tension, and focusing instead on allowing your taut mind and muscles to let go.

What Are the Consequences of Stress?

First of all, it should be stated that stress shouldn't be viewed as something negative. In fact, your stress reaction is meant to protect you. Your body is instinctually wired to react to stressful situations, a result from when attacks from predators, like lions and tigers, were a legitimate concern for mankind. Such aggressors are rare today, but that doesn't mean there is less to worry about in our civilized age. Contrarily, you likely face demanding

workloads, family issues, a fast-passed life, and economic turmoil. Compact these irritants with a traumatic event, and your body will naturally associate your mental stress as physical assault, and respond by tensing as if you are under constant attack.

If you're startled—say you narrowly miss being hit by a car—your hypothalamus, a small region located at the base of your brain, sets off a chain of events in your body. Nerve and hormonal signals prompt your adrenal glands, located atop your kidneys, to surge hormones, including cortisol and adrenaline.

Cortisol is a stress hormone that affects sugar (glucose) levels, tissue repair, immune system, digestive system, reproductive system, growth processes, mood, motivation, and anxiety.

Adrenaline increases your heart rate, elevates your blood pressure and boosts energy supplies.

This chemical response is essential to your survival. It's the alarm system that triggers the "fight-or-flight reaction." The problem occurs when your stress response no longer self-regulates. Sometimes it gets stuck in the on position, not allowing hormone levels to decrease back to normal once a

perceived threat has passed. This leads to chronic tension.

Long term activation of the stress response—and the subsequent overexposure to cortisol and adrenaline—can disrupt almost every bodily process. This puts you at increased risk of numerous health problems and diseases, including:

Heart disease

Acid peptic disease

Sleep problems

Asthma

Fatigue

Tension headaches

Alcoholism and drug abuse

Hypertension

Ulcers

Depression

Obesity

Irritable bowel syndrome

Psychoneuroses

Sexual dysfunction

Memory impairment

Skin conditions and diseases like Psoriasis, Lichen Planus, Urticaria, Pruritus, Neurodermatitis, etc (Contrada & Baum, 2010).

Why Do Some People Handle Stress Better Than Others?

Reactions to stress and trauma is different for everyone. Maybe you're the laid back type who lets everything roll off your back, or perhaps you react strongly to the slightest appearance of stress. Wherever you land on the spectrum of these two extremes, most responses to stress fall under one of two categories:

Life experiences. Strong stress reactions can be traced to your early life. People who experienced traumatic events as children, such as abuse or neglect, tend to be particularly vulnerable to stress as adults.

Genetics. Genes that govern stress response keep most people on a fairly even keel. Though, overactive or underactive stress responses may stem from variations in these genes.

Face to face time with your counselor during sessions will certainly reveal how life experiences and genetics affect your response to trauma and stress (Contrada & Baum, 2010).

What Are the Benefits of Relaxation?

When trauma occurs or life becomes excessively hectic, relaxation is too often the first thing to take a back seat in your life, causing you to miss out on the benefits associated with a mind and body balanced and at rest. Practicing relaxation techniques on a regular basis will positively affect almost every bodily system by appropriately switching your stress response to the off position, allowing your hormone levels to balance out. These benefits include:

- Slowing your heart rate

- Lowering your blood pressure

- Slowing your breathing rate

- Increasing blood flow to major muscles

- Reducing muscle tension and chronic pain

- Improving your concentration

- Reducing anger and frustration

Boosting confidence to handle problems (Payne & Donaghy, 2010)

In order to gain the most benefit, you may try experimenting with combining elements of different techniques. For example, try adding deep breathing, or mindful awareness to a self-massage. Also, feel free to combine relaxation techniques with the other homework outcomes mentioned in other chapters.

With practice, you should expect to see improvement in how you carry your tension and stress. As you grow more comfortable and confident arriving at a deep state of rest while practicing relaxation techniques, you'll find yourself naturally carrying your tranquility with you after you conclude the exercises and move on about your day. You'll grow more mindful of tension in your body, the nature of your thoughts, and your environment.

You must remember that relaxation is a skill that improves with practice. Initially, you might have a difficult time balancing your mind and body. Don't get discouraged if this happens, as quite a bit of energy is required to focus on transitioning from states of agitation to relaxation. If you try a particular

technique and it doesn't feel like a good fit for you, try another. If none of your attempts at relaxation seem to work, talk to your counselor about other options. Also, it's important to mention that in certain cases, especially with people who have a history of abuse, some may experience emotional discomfort during certain relaxation techniques. It's common to experience rushes of emotions during deep relaxation, but if it ever becomes unbearable, stop what you're doing and talk to your counselor about what to try instead.

The Counselor Column for Chapter 5: "How Important Is Relaxation?" by

Mark Carpenter, LPC

This one should be fun! Of all the things we are asking you to do in this book, you should really enjoy this assignment. Let's face it, relaxation feels better than tension. It's not even that we are asking you to do more. We are asking you to do less, to take it easy, to let go, to release. When you do this you'll find your neck and shoulders unwinding, your teeth not grinding, your headaches subsiding very quickly, or even immediately.

However, here is a word of caution: as you learn to let go through relaxation, thoughts may surface, thoughts that may be difficult to deal with. I've found that tense bodies often repress thoughts and feelings. True relaxation gets you in touch with the reality that your mind and body are connected, and this connection may reveal old wounds. Through years of personal work and counseling, I've learned to recognize tension that often creeps up my neck, shoulders, and jaw. These sensations act as red flags to notify me that I am struggling mentally with something that my body is trying to hide. Be prepared to talk with your counselor about what relaxation reveals to you, and learn to recognize

tension in your own body. What is it hiding?

The Client Column for Chapter 5: "How Important Is Relaxation?" by Tyler Orr, NCC

Both my mind and body felt like tangled, twisted, and taut messes when I began counseling. My head and neck hurt constantly. I remember my legs, especially my calf muscles, aching and I found it hard to even walk at times. My mind was so full of painful and regretful thoughts, I couldn't think straight. It was like there was no room left for any goodness to develop.

Learning to relax may have been the most beneficial part of counseling for me, personally. My counselor worked with me, teaching me some basic relaxation and breathing exercises that I still use to this day. He taught me how to do this while sitting, lying down, and even standing. He also explained the health risks involved with staying so stressed. Luckily, the process of unwinding took place before any long-term damage was done.