



Relaxation Techniques

THE STRESS RESPONSE

Life. It's stressful. The daily traffic jam you call a commute, the occasional juggling of schedules to accommodate a sick child, the unexpected car repair, the news of a serious illness. No matter what the cause, your body reacts to these situations with a flood of stress hormones designed to help you stay on high alert. Your heart pounds, breathing becomes rapid and shallow, senses are heightened, and your muscles become tense.

This stress response, also known as the "fight-or-flight" response, is the body's normal reaction to what it believes to be a threat. These threats can result in one-time or short-term stress, or they can result in stress that continues over a long period of time, which is referred to as chronic stress. The bad news: when high levels of stress hormones are secreted often, or remain elevated for extended periods of time, they can contribute to stress-related medical conditions like heart disease, gastrointestinal disease, adrenal fatigue, and more.

THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

While we can't avoid all the stress in our lives, we can create habits that will help us respond to it in healthier ways. According to Dr. Herbert Benson, author of *The Relaxation Response*, through regular practice we can encourage our body to release chemicals and brain signals that help turn off the fight-or-flight response and bring the body back to its pre-stress levels. The following is the Relaxation Response technique paraphrased from Dr. Benson's book.

To elicit the Relaxation Response:

- Find a quiet spot and sit in a comfortable position
- Close your eyes
- Begin to relax all of your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face.
- Become aware of your breathing. Breathe through your nose. Breathe easily and naturally. As you breathe out, say the word "one" silently to yourself.
- Continue this for 10 to 20 minutes. You can open your eyes to check the time; but don't use an alarm.
- Allow relaxation to happen at its own pace. If distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by refocusing on your breath and repeating the word "one".
- When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes before opening your eyes and standing up.

At first, it may be hard for you to sit still for 5 minutes, let alone 10-20! As you practice though, you will find it easier to extend the time you spend using this technique, and the relaxation response should come with little effort. Aim to establish a daily routine that includes time to elicit the relaxation response at least once for 10-20 minutes.

Note: if repeating the word "one" seems weird or uncomfortable, you can choose any soothing sounding word, preferably one with no meaning or association. The goal is to avoid stimulating the mind with unnecessary thought.



RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

There are many relaxation techniques, but the goal is similar in them all: to produce the body's natural relaxation response. If you have a medical condition, always seek the advice of your healthcare team to see if a particular practice is right for you.

- **Deep breathing.** In this simple technique, you take long, slow, deep breaths. As you breathe, clear your mind from distracting thoughts and sensations.
- **Body scan.** This technique combines deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation. After a few minutes of deep breathing, focus on one part of the body (like your feet or legs). Concentrate on relaxing those muscles and then move on to other body parts.
- **Guided imagery.** For this technique, you imagine soothing scenes, places, or experiences to help you relax and focus. There are free apps and online recordings of calming scenes you can use. Just make sure to choose imagery you find soothing.
- **Mindfulness meditation.** This practice involves sitting comfortably, focusing on your breathing, and bringing your mind's attention to the present moment without drifting into concerns about the past or the future.
- **Yoga, tai chi, and qigong.** These three ancient arts combine rhythmic breathing with a series of postures or flowing movements. The physical aspects of these practices offer a mental focus that can help tame an overactive mind. They can also enhance your flexibility and balance.
- **Repetitive prayer.** For this technique, silently repeat a short prayer or phrase from a prayer while practicing deep breathing. This method may be especially appealing if religion or spirituality is meaningful to you.
- **Be present.** Spend time in the moment, focusing on your senses. Take 5 minutes thinking on one behavior only, with awareness. For example, notice how the air feels on your face while walking, or notice the texture and taste of each bite of food.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

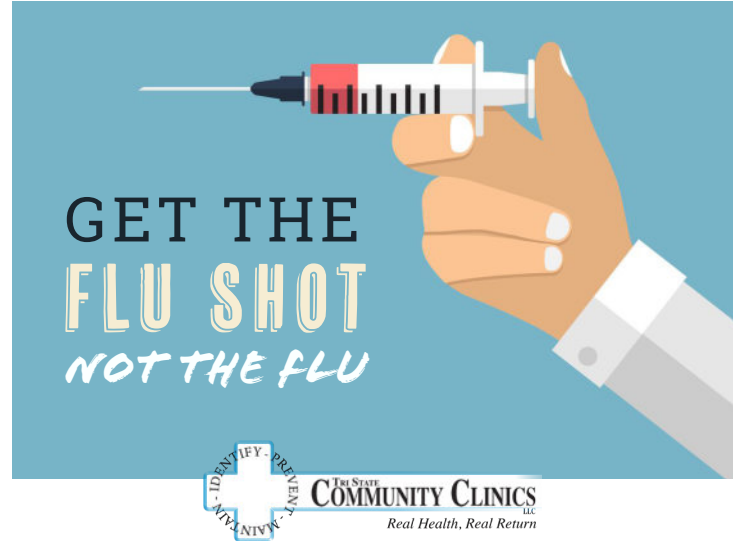
Practicing relaxation techniques can have many health benefits, including: Slowing heart rate, lowering blood pressure, slowing your breathing rate, improving digestion, maintaining normal blood sugar levels, reducing activity of stress hormones, increasing blood flow to major muscles, reducing muscle tension and chronic pain, improving concentration and mood, improving sleep quality, lowering fatigue, reducing anger and frustration,

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HEALTHY RECIPE



SWEET POTATO ROUNDS WITH HERBED RICOTTA + WALNUTS

ingredients:

- 1 large sweet potato sliced into ¼-inch rounds
- 1 Tbsp avocado oil
- 1 pinch ground cinnamon

HERBED RICOTTA:

- 1 cup whole milk ricotta cheese
- 1-½ tsp Italian seasoning
- 1 Tbsp + 1 tsp honey
- ¼ tsp sea salt or to taste

instructions:

1. Add all of the ingredients for the herbed ricotta to a small bowl and stir well to combine. Refrigerate until ready to use.
2. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F. Add the sweet potato slices to a large mixing bowl and drizzle with grape seed or olive oil. Sprinkle sea salt and ground cinnamon over rounds. Use your hands to rub the oil and seasoning on both sides of the sweet potato rounds. Arrange rounds on a large baking sheet (or two if necessary). Bake for 20 minutes. Flip the rounds, then bake for another 17 to 20 minutes, or until rounds are cooked through and crispy on the edges
3. Spread walnuts on a baking sheet. 10 minutes before the potato rounds are finished cooking, place the walnuts in the oven to roast.
4. Remove sweet potato rounds and walnuts from the oven. Place walnuts on a cutting board and chop.
5. Place oven on high broil setting and move the oven wrack second to the top shelf. Place a dollop of herbed ricotta on each sweet potato round and place in the oven for 2 minutes, just until ricotta is melty and warm.
6. Add chopped walnuts and dried cranberries to the rounds. Drizzle with honey and serve!

FOR SERVING:

- 1 cup raw walnuts roasted and chopped
- ¾ cup dried cranberries
- honey