

MANAGING STRESS BEFORE IT MANAGES YOU: EXERCISES TO MANAGE STRESS

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I am often asked by my clients what they can do to manage stress and feel more relaxed. The following three stress management and relaxation techniques are those that I frequently recommend to my clients.

1. Deep Breathing-While this seems simple enough, most of us do “shallow breathing” as opposed to deep diaphragmatic breathing. Taking a few deep breaths during the day, especially when stressed or anxious, will instantly relax you. You can even do this while driving (especially when someone cuts you off!) or standing in line at the store/bank. Deep breathing is the foundation when doing deeper relaxation exercises such as meditation.

- Inhale slowly through the nose. You may want to place your hand on your stomach, feeling it expand, to make sure you are taking in air all the way through to your diaphragm.
- Exhale slowly through the mouth by blowing the air out of your mouth.
- Repeat a few times.

2. Body Scan-During the day, mentally “scan” your body from your head to your toes to see if there is tension anywhere in your body. Most of us tense our muscles unconsciously when we are stressed then wonder why we feel sore. Frequently, being tense becomes “natural” and thus, we become accustomed and desensitized to this. Checking your body in this way “tunes” you in to any tension you may be carrying. Once you are aware of any muscle tension, you can then do simple physical exercises to loosen these areas. This exercise takes no more than five minutes to do.

- While sitting or standing, “scan” your body (from head to toe) for any tension you may be feeling.
- As you are checking/scanning your body for muscle tension, do some physical exercises or stretches to release any tightness such as opening and closing your mouth (to release tightened jaw muscles), neck rolls or shoulder shrugs, shaking your hands and fingers, stretching your back, rotating your ankles, etc.
- Do this exercise a few times throughout the day.

3. Progressive Muscle Relaxation-This exercise takes more time than the other two, but it’s worth doing especially after a hard day at work or when you have trouble relaxing. This is a deep relaxation exercise so you want to allot some time and space when doing this. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing (not to a point of pain) and relaxing different muscle groups in the body. The idea is that by tensing and relaxing your muscles, you become aware of how your body/muscles feel when tense versus relaxed. Keep in mind that this may feel strange to you at first if you are not used to doing relaxation exercises, but keep at it.

- Find a comfortable chair to sit on or semi-recline. A recliner, oversized chair, or sofa will do. I don't recommend lying down completely, especially when you are first learning to do this, as you may fall asleep *before* completing the exercise. (While this is not necessarily "bad," you want to experience the entire exercise and the feeling of being in a relaxed state.). Make sure that you are in a setting that is quiet (i.e., no TV, turn off the phone).
- Relax your body by placing your hands at your sides and uncrossing your legs.
- Close your eyes and do some deep breathing (as mentioned above) to further relax your body.
- When you feel relaxed, begin by tensing your feet by curling your toes downward. Hold the tension for a few seconds and then relax the muscles.
- Move to your calf muscles by flexing your feet toward you. Hold this position for a few seconds and then relax.
- Squeeze your thighs together for a few seconds and then relax.
- Continue to contract and relax different muscle groups, *slowly* working your way up from your feet/toes to your calves, thighs, back, hands, arms, shoulders, and facial muscles. Take a few deep breaths between muscle groups to continue to increase the feeling of relaxation.
- Once you have completed tensing and relaxing all muscle groups, take a moment to check your body for any "residual" tension. Go back to that area and tense and relax that muscle group.
- Allow yourself to feel your body in a state of relaxation, continuing to take deep breaths.
- When you are ready, open your eyes and slowly get up from the chair and back into your routine. Take your time when doing this exercise. Again, this exercise should not be done to the point of pain. If you feel any pain or discomfort in any of the muscle groups, stop and move on to the next muscle group.

Begin incorporating these exercises into your daily routine and you will feel better able to manage your stress and anxiety.

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