



The Gentle Path to Wellness: Stress Reduction through Body Awareness

Achieving balance and relaxation using the tools of Body Awareness, Breathing, Meditation, Progressive Muscle Relaxation, Guided Imagery, Hypnosis, Autogenics, Cognitive-Behavioral Training and Exercise

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Introduction

Stress is an every day occurrence. It is any change that you must adjust to. It can be simple or complex, inspiring or overwhelming, positive or negative according to how you react. You experience stress from three basic sources: your environment, your body, and your thoughts. Your environment bombards you with demands to adjust. You must endure weather, noise, crowding, time pressures, performance standards, and various threats to your security and self esteem. Your body as well is undergoing changes as you age, and pass through various stages of life. There are also body changes which are due to innate “fight or flight” responses whenever you feel threatened which can be disturbing and taxing to the body system. If the body is not given relief from the biochemical changes that occur during the “fight or flight” response, chronic stress may result. Stress has been found to be related to many physical ailments such as hypertension, headaches, peptic ulcers, arthritis, colitis, diarrhea, asthma, cardiac arrhythmias, sexual problems, circulatory problems, muscular tension, and even cancer. The other source of stress derives from your thoughts. How you interpret and label your experiences, what you fear and predict about the future, can serve either to relax or stress you. Dwelling on negative thoughts, and “worrying” can produce tension in your body, which in turn creates the subjective feeling of uneasiness and leads to more anxious thoughts. Stress is the major source of emotional, mental, and spiritual unease in the form of anxiety and depression.

You will not be able to escape all the stresses of life or completely turn off your innate “fight or flight” response, but you can learn to counteract your habitual reaction to stress by learning to relax. The very centers of the brain that have speeded up your biochemical processes when you are alarmed can be called upon to slow these processes down. The relaxation response is the opposite of the alarm response, and it returns the body to its natural balanced state. The relaxation response has a recuperative effect in that it allows you a respite from external stress. It keeps you from using up all your vital energy at once. It prevents you from overreacting and becoming finally overwhelmed by the stresses in your life. It normalizes your physical, mental, and emotional processes and allows you to return to a balanced state.

Body Awareness

It is important to recognize what are the major sources of stress in your life and take action on them. Creating an inventory for self-examination to realize the degree to which these stressors impact you would be a healthy beginning step to reducing your symptoms.

Even more important is body awareness in recognizing and reducing your stress. There is a close relationship between mind and body. The importance of body states, their effect on consciousness, and their relationship to stress has been emphasized in many philosophies such as Zen, Yoga and Sufi throughout the centuries. The body registers stress long before the conscious mind does. Muscular tension is your body's way of letting you know you are under stress. It has been well documented, that when you experience stress you tense your body. When the stress is removed, the tension will also go away. Chronic muscular tension occurs in people with particular attitudes which tend to tighten specific muscle groups. This chronic muscular tension restricts digestion, limits self-expression, and decreases energy. Every contracted muscle blocks movement.

It is important to differentiate between your external awareness and internal awareness in order to separate the world from your physical reaction to it. External awareness includes stimulation to the five senses from the outside world. Internal awareness refers to any physical sensation, feeling emotional discomfort or comfort inside your body. Much of the tension in your body is not felt because most of your awareness is directed to the outside world. The following exercises and training are designed to increase your body awareness and optimize your ability to relax. You will then begin your initial steps to creating your health and well-being.

Awareness Exercise

1. First, focus your attention on the outside world. Start sentences with "I am aware of _____" for example, "I am aware of the cars going by outside the window."
2. Second, after you have become aware of everything that is going on around you, shift to focusing your attention on your body, your physical sensations, your inner world. For example, "I am aware of feeling warm, tension in my neck, and my stomach gurgling."
3. Move your attention back and forth between your internal and external awareness. For example, "I am aware of the chair under me, the light above on the ceiling, my shoulders being tight, the scent of the candle burning."

Used at free moments throughout the day, this exercise allows you to separate and appreciate the real difference between your inner and outer worlds.

Body Scan Exercise

Close your eyes.....Start with your head and move down your body.....notice your eyes if you are straining or relaxed.....notice your jaw, is it clenched or held tight.....ask your self "where am I tense???"... and move down to the neck and shoulders.... Whenever you discover a tense area, keep your attention there so that you become aware of it.....be aware of the muscles in your body that are tense as you move down the back and your entire body down to your toes. Then say to yourself, "I am aware that I am tensing my lower back.....I am hurting myself...I am creating tension in my body." At this point, note that all muscular tension is self produced. Ask yourself, is there any life situation or belief thought that may be causing this tension in your body, and what can you do to change it?

Letting Go of Your Body Exercise

Lie down in a comfortable place. ... Close your eyes....Check yourself for comfort.....Shift your body around until you are comfortable.....Become aware of your breathing.. feel the air ...move

into your nose, down your throat and into your lungs... Focus on your body and let all of the parts come into your awareness spontaneously... What parts of your body come into awareness first??? Notice which parts of your body you can easily feel and those parts that have little sensation.... Do you notice any difference between the left and right side of the body??? Now become aware of any physical sensation or discomfort you may be feeling....Become aware of this discomfort until you can describe it in detail.....Keep noticing what happens as you place your attention here... Create complete space around it and notice if it changes...Simply keep noticing what happens....let your body do whatever it wants to....Stay present and aware by noticing over and over. Giving space and allowing the body to do what it wants to naturally is letting go and allowing life to flow through you, by being in the moment just as it is. Practice this for five to ten minutes a day.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Deep muscle relaxation reduces physiological tension and is incompatible with anxiety. Progressive relaxation of your muscles reduces pulse rate and blood pressure as well as decreasing perspiration and respiration rates. Deep muscle relaxation, when successfully mastered, can be used to prevent and manage anxiety. It provides a way of identifying where you are holding tension in the body and in which specific muscle groups. It helps you distinguish between sensations of tension and deep relaxation. Four major muscle groups will be covered:

1. head, face, neck and shoulders, including concentration on cheeks, nose, eyes, jaws, throat, lips, and tongue.
2. hands, forearms, and biceps.
3. chest, stomach, and lower back.
4. thighs, buttocks, calves, and feet.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation can be practiced lying down or in a chair. Each muscle or muscle grouping is tensed for five seconds and then relaxed for twenty seconds. If an area remains tense you can repeat the process five times. It is also useful to use relaxing expressions such as “let go of the tension,” or “I am feeling calm and relaxed,” or “let the tension dissolve away.”

There are two versions of this exercise. The first one is the basic procedure of going through all the muscle groups, which will familiarize you with the muscles that are most commonly tense. The second procedure is a shortened version. An example of the first procedure is: beginning by getting into a comfortable position. Now clench your right fist, tighter and tighter, studying the tension as you do so. Keep it clenched and notice the tension in your fist, hand and forearm. Now relax. Feel the looseness in your right hand, and notice the contrast with the tension. Repeat this procedure noticing the difference between tension and relaxation. Now do this with your left fist, then both fists at once. This process is continued throughout the whole body, covering the four muscle groups. The shortened version is a procedure for achieving deep muscle relaxation quickly.

1. Wrinkle up your forehead. Press your head back, and roll it clockwise in a complete circle. Reverse. Now wrinkle your face like a walnut. Frown, squint your eyes, and purse your lips, with your shoulders hunched. Now relax.
2. Curl both your fists, tightening your biceps and forearms. Now relax.
3. Arch your back as you take a deep breath into the chest. Hold. Relax. Take a deep breath, pressing out the stomach. Hold. Relax.
4. Pull feet and toes back toward your face, tightening your shins. Hold. Relax. Curl toes, simultaneously tightening calves, thighs, and buttocks. Hold. Relax.

Breathing

Breathing is essential for life. Proper breathing is an anti-dote to stress. Although we all breathe, few of us retain the habit of natural, full breathing. Proper breathing means that all the body systems are being affected beneficially. The air coming in reaches the lungs and the bloodstream. If the blood that reaches the bodily organs is poorly oxygenated, it contributes to anxiety states, depression, and fatigue, and makes each stressful situation many times harder to cope with. Proper breathing habits are essential for good mental and physical health.

Breathing Exercise

1. Sit comfortably, with your posture aligned, hands on knees, feet flat on the floor or lie down on a blanket or rug on the floor. Make sure your spine is straight. When on the floor, raise knees, and place feet about 8 inches apart.
2. Scan your body for tension.
3. Place your left hand on your abdomen and your right hand on your chest.
4. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into your abdomen to push up your hand as much as feels comfortable. Notice the rise and fall of your chest with your abdomen. Inhale through your nose, and gently exhale through your mouth. Take long slow deep breaths which raise and lower your abdomen. Focus on the sound and feeling sensation of the breath as it enters and leaves your nostrils, the coolness on the inhalation, and the warmth on the exhalation. Center your attention on breathing in and out of the chest.
5. Begin focusing on the next cycle of inhalation and exhalation.
6. When you have completed this, return to the breath, the rising and falling of the abdomen, with continued attention on breathing in and out of the chest.
7. Simply notice the body's gentle rhythm in this cycle of breathing and your body's release of tension.
8. Continue deep breathing for about five or ten minutes, scan for tension, release by breathing into the tension and simply notice what happens.

Breathing Exercise- The Relaxing Sigh

During the day you may notice yourself sighing or yawning. This is generally a sign that you are not getting enough oxygen. Sighing and yawning are your body's way of remedying the situation. A sigh is often accompanied by a sense that things are not quite as they should be with an accompanying feeling of tension. A sigh releases a bit of tension and can be practiced at will as a means of relaxing.

1. Sit or stand up straight.
2. Sigh deeply, letting out a sound of deep relief as the air rushes out of your lungs.
3. Don't think about inhaling_ just let the air in naturally.
4. Repeat this procedure eight or twelve times whenever you feel the need for it, and experience the feeling of relaxation.

There are many types of breathing exercises that can be done, from simple to more advanced yogic breathwork. Please begin gently, and master simple breathing and relaxing techniques first.

Meditation

For thousands of years, members of almost all cultures have sought inner peace and harmony through one form or another of meditation. Although meditation has been associated with spiritual disciplines as a means of becoming one with God or the universe, finding enlightenment, achieving selflessness, and other virtues, it has also been a well documented fact,

that meditation can be practiced independently of religious or philosophical orientation, purely as a means of reducing inner discord and increasing self awareness.

Through the process of meditation, you learn to focus uncritically, on one thing at a time. As the process of experiencing uncritically, without opinions and judgments, is generalized to other areas of your life, you find that you are able to give yourself whole-heartedly to whatever you are doing. You are able to know and accept habitual patterns of perception, thought and feeling, which previously had tremendous influence over your life without your awareness.

Meditation has been found effective in creating a state of deep relaxation in a relatively short time. It has been suggested that the rapid deep relaxation achieved during meditation results from focusing on one thing at a time. In other words, the amount of internal and external stimuli that you must respond to is greatly reduced creating more of a sense of stillness and peace. Meditation has many beneficial effects on many physiological processes. Meditation has been used successfully in the prevention and treatment of high blood pressure, heart disease, and strokes. It has proved helpful in curtailing obsessive thinking, anxiety, depression, and hostility. It improves concentration and attention.

There are four components of meditation:

1. Finding a quiet place.
2. Choosing a comfortable sitting position, either sitting in a chair or cross-legged on the floor, or on your knees sitting back on your heels.
3. Establishing your posture with a straight back and your head resting gently on your neck.
4. Focusing on your breath, and returning to the breath over and over, as distracting thoughts enter your mind.
5. Maintaining an open attitude. Letting whatever wants to arise, arise..... simply watching what happens as a passive observer, noticing the sensations in the body, the belief thoughts as they pass by, without attaching to the judgments and opinions of yourself or others in the present moment.....being mindful. It means not being concerned about how well you are doing.

Breath Counting Meditation

This is a simple form of meditation that is widely used throughout the world. There are many forms of meditation but this one is good for achieving deep relaxation, for learning to focus attention, and for developing your own natural pace. While you are likely to experience some immediate satisfaction when meditating, the profound effects of meditation on your life are not likely to be felt for many months.

1. Go to your quiet place, and center yourself. Assume your sitting posture and get settled. Quickly scan your body for tension, and relax. Close your eyes.
2. Breathe through your nose. Inhale, exhale and pause. Breathe in easily and naturally.
3. As you exhale, say silently to yourself, "one." Continue to breathe in and out, saying "two" on the exhale, and again breathing in and out, and saying "three" on the exhale.
4. When thoughts or perceptions take your attention away from your breathing, let go of them quickly, and return to counting your breath.
5. Continue doing cycles of three inhalations and exhalations for ten to fifteen minutes a day.

Guided Imagery

You can significantly reduce stress with something enormously powerful: your imagination. This is a way to appreciate your own inner life and learn how to draw on its healing powers in times of stress. There are many stress reduction techniques utilizing the intuitive, imaginative part of the mind. Stimulating the

imagination can happen through visualization, guided imagery, and listening to music. The following is an example of guided imagery that can employ your imagination to create relaxation.

The elements of guided imagery include finding a comfortable position, closing your eyes, focusing on your physical sensations, and practicing deep breathing.

Mountain Path Exercise

Close your eyes...Imagine yourself leaving the area where you live....Leave the daily hassles and fast pace behind....Imagine yourself going across a valley and moving closer and closer to a mountain range....Imagine yourself in a mountain range...You are going up a winding road...Find a path off of this and start walking gently upward....Find a comfortable place to stop... Take some time to examine all the tension and stress in your life...Give the tension and stress shapes and colors...Look at them carefully, and then put them down on the side of the path....Continue walking until you come to the top....Look out over the scenery, the hills, the valleys, and upward at the sun and billowy clouds, and take some deep relaxing breaths....What do you see????.....Find a comfortable place and rest there.....What is your special place like????....Be aware of your total surroundings....Be aware of the sights, smells, and sounds....Be aware of how you are feeling....Get settled and relax....You are now feeling totally relaxed...Pause for three to five minutes....Look around at your special place once more...Remember this is your special quiet place to relax and you can come here anytime you want to....Come back to the room and know that this imagery is something you have created, and you can use it whenever you want to feel relaxed.

Self Hypnosis

Self hypnosis is a powerful way to counteract stress and stress-related illness. It is one of the fastest, easiest methods of inducing relaxation. In some ways, hypnosis is very similar to sleep: there is a narrowing of consciousness, accompanied by inertia and passivity. But unlike sleep, there is never a complete loss of awareness. Some of the benefits from hypnosis include: 1) the ability to produce anesthesia in any part of the body, 2) to make post-hypnotic suggestions to improve sleep, coping, to control painful symptoms, to stop smoking, to curb appetite and lose weight, etc. 3) to control some organic functions as heart rate, etc.4) to do age regression to relive an experience in the past with all five senses, that may have been forgotten because it was painful. 5) to increase your capacity to concentrate, to learn, and to remember. In general, you can use hypnosis to relax, and to make positive suggestions for changes in your life.

The Self Induction:

Sit in a comfortable position. The first thing you need is something to encourage eye fixation. A candle works, or you can use a picture, a place on the wall or the crack in the ceiling, a fire in the fireplace, etc. The first step in self hypnosis is learning the power of suggestion. As you watch, suggest to yourself that your eyes are getting heavier, or are beginning to sting with the stare, or are starting to blink and flutter - whichever works best for you. Take several deep breaths letting go of the air with a sigh. Silently suggest, "As I look at the candle, my eyelids are feeling heavier and heavier. They feel like weights are dragging them down. They are almost heavy enough to close....Heavier, and heavier....In a little while, I will be so relaxed and sleepy, that they will close."

Now present a key phrase...'Relax now'.....Repeat this slowly as your eyes close. **You could also use your favorite color or place that is beautiful and has meaning for you.**

With your eyes closed, begin the relaxation of all your muscles, using the Progressive Relaxation Exercise above. Notice that as your muscles become relaxed they take on a heavy feeling. Suggest to yourself that

you are going deeper and deeper. Imagine going down an escalator or staircase, counting back from ten to zero. Once you have arrived you can make auto suggestions to yourself that are positive and direct...such as “I can work steadily or calmly or “I will enjoy today”...Make suggestions for the immediate future using “soon”...”soon my head will feel cool and relaxed”...Attach a visual image and emotion to your suggestion...the “next time I see ____I will feel secure and relaxed”...Once hypnotized, your unconscious mind is ready to believe what you tell it, “I can let go of smoking.” See and feel the sensation of letting it go...Now let yourself slip a little deeper as you imagine the candle flame flicker and weave. Suggest to your self that in a moment, when you wake up, you will feel better, more alert, refreshed and good about what you have done.” When you are ready to awaken, say to yourself, “Now, I am going to wake up,” and count to three.

Autogenics

Autogenic Training is a systematic program that will teach your body and mind to respond quickly and effectively to your verbal commands to relax and return to a balanced and normal state. It is one of the most effective and comprehensive reducers of chronic stress. Autogenic training is being used across the country as one of the treatment of choice to teach self regulation of the autonomic nervous system. In its present form, Autonomic Training provides you with the recuperative effects of traditional hypnosis. You can learn to induce the feeling of warmth and heaviness whenever you choose. AT has been found effective in the treatment of various disorders of the respiratory tract, gastrointestinal tract, circulatory system, and high blood pressure. It has been found useful in reducing anxiety, irritability and pain.

Begin in a comfortable sitting or lying down position with eyes closed.....Repeat the following verbal formulas four to seven times a day for three minutes....You can add a visualization of weights to your arms and legs if needed:

Heaviness Theme: My right arm is heavy...My left arm is heavy... Both of my arms are heavy.....

My right leg is heavy...My left leg is heavy....both of my legs are heavy....My arms and legs are heavy

Warmth Theme: My right arm is heavy...My arms and legs are heavy... My right arm is warm...My left arm is warmboth of my arms are warm...

My right arm is heavy ...My arms and legs are heavy...My right arm is warm...My left arm is warm....

My right leg is warm.....My left leg is warm...Both my legs are warm....My arms and legs are warm

Heartbeat Theme: My right arm is heavy ...My arms are heavy and warm....My heartbeat is calm and regular

Breathing Theme: My right arm is heavy and warmMy arms and legs are heavy and warm....My heartbeat is calm and regular.....my breathing is slow and deep

Forehead Theme: My right arm is heavy and warm.....My arms and legs are heavy and warm.... My heartbeat is calm and regular... My breathing is slow and deep... My forehead is cool.

Cognitive-Behavioral Training

Thought Stopping/Mind Control

It has been well documented that negative and frightening thoughts invariable precede negative and frightening emotions. If the thoughts can be controlled, overall stress can be significantly reduced.

1. Make a stressful thoughts inventory, to assess which recurrent thought are the most painful and intrusive, and to what level that they interfere with or intrude upon normal functioning.
2. Imagine the thought. Close your eyes and bring into imagination the situation in which the stressful thought is likely to occur. Try to include normal as well as obsessive thinking. In this way you can interrupt the stressful thoughts while allowing a continuing flow of healthy thinking.

3. Thought interruption. This can be accomplished by using starter techniques or “alarm clocks.” When the beeper goes off shout stop!!! You may also want to raise your hands, stand up. Let your mind empty.
4. Unaided thought interruption. Now take control of the s thought stopping without the timer and simply shout to your self stop!!!!
5. Thought substitution. Make up some positive assertive statements that are appropriate to the target situation.
6. Thought labeling. Is this rehearsing, planning, reviewing or creating????
7. Place the stressful thought into the three breaths meditation exercise, breathing the thought into your chest.
8. Separate thought from the feeling sensation in the body. This is a thought and this is a sensation arising in the body. They are separate entities.
9. Observe the mind-body connection.
10. Utilize positive and relaxing techniques for distraction into body awareness, out of the mind, into the breath.

Refuting Irrational Ideas/ Belief Thoughts

“Man is not disturbed by events, but by the view he takes of them.” Greek scholar

Almost every minute of your conscious life you are engaged in self-talk, your internal thought language. These are the words, opinions, judgments, in how you interpret the world. If the self talk is accurate and in touch with reality, you function well. If it is irrational, and untrue, then you experience stress and emotional disturbance. An example of this self talk is “I can’t bear to be alone,” and a core belief at the bottom of this: “I am not good enough, strong enough, don’t trust myself, etc.”

1. Do a Beliefs Inventory
2. Know the Rules to Promote Rational Thinking:
 - It doesn’t do anything to me.
 - Everything is exactly the way it should be
 - All humans are fallible creatures
 - It takes two to have conflict
 - The original cause is lost in antiquity
 - We feel the way we think
 - Don’t take anything personally
 - Don’t make assumptions
3. Disputing and challenging the Irrational Idea:
 - Select the irrational idea
 - Is there any rational support for this idea???
 - What evidence exists for the falseness of this idea???
 - Does any evidence exist for the truth of this idea???
 - What is the worst thing that could happen to me???
 - What good things might occur????
 - What are some alternative thoughts????
 - What are some alternative emotions??????
 - What are some alternative actions?????
4. How can I manage my time better so stressful thoughts are reduced??
5. How can I nourish my body to promote positive thinking and responding???

Exercise

Exercise is one of the simplest and most effective means of stress reduction. Vigorous physical exertion is the natural outlet for your body when it is tense. Simple walking is highly beneficial to calm the body and mind. After exercise your body returns to its normal equilibrium and you feel

relaxed and refreshed. Walking in the sun, breathing fresh air, and being in nature is one of the greatest antidotes to stress and increases your desire for living a balanced and healthy life.

Your ability to relax, learn to handle stress, and heal yourself is a tremendous power. In this process, it is often beneficial to consult with your health care professional and engage their knowledge and guidance. My services are available to assist you in accessing your inner resources and awareness, to achieve well-being.