

Meditation and Relaxation

by David G. Danskin, Ph.D.; Kansas State University



Meditation is a very effective method of relaxation. The idea of meditation is to focus your thoughts on one relaxing thing for a sustained period of time. This rests your mind by diverting it from thinking about the problems that have caused stress. It gives your body time to relax and recuperate and clear away toxins that may have built up through stress and mental or physical activity. Meditation slows breathing, reduces blood pressure, helps muscles relax, gives the body time to eliminate lactic acid and other waste products, reduces anxiety, eliminates stressful thoughts, helps with clear thinking, focused concentration, reduces irritability, and reduces stress headaches.

Meditation Techniques

The essence of meditation is to quiet your thoughts by focusing completely on just one thing. Unlike hypnosis, which is more of a passive experience, meditation is an active process which seeks to exclude outside thoughts by concentrating all mental faculties on the subject of meditation. In all cases, it helps if your body is relaxed. It should be in a position that you can comfortably sustain for a period of time (20 - 30 minutes is ideal). Sitting in a comfortable chair, lying on a bed, or the lotus position may be equally effective. A number of different focuses of concentration may be used. Which one you choose is a matter of personal taste. Some of these are detailed below:

- **Breathing:**
A useful method may be to focus your attention on your breathing. Concentrate on breaths in and out. You can accompany this by counting your breaths using the numbers 0 to 9. You can visualize images of the numbers changing with each breath. Alternatively you could visualize health and relaxation flowing into your body when you inhale, and stress or pain flowing out when you exhale.
- **Focusing on an object:**
Here you completely focus attention on examination of an object. Look at it in immense detail for the entire meditation. Examine the shape, color differences, texture, temperature and movement of the object. Objects often used are flowers, candle flames or flowing designs. However, you can use other objects equally effectively (e.g. alarm clocks, desk lamps, or even coffee mugs!)
- **Focus on a sound:**
Some people like to focus on sounds. The classic example is the Sanskrit word 'Om', meaning 'perfection.' Whether or not this is practical depends on your lifestyle.
- **Imagery:**
This can be a very refreshing and pleasant way of meditating. Here you create a mental image of a pleasant and relaxing place in your mind. Involve all your senses in the imagery: see the place, hear the sounds, smell the aromas, feel the temperature and the movement of the wind. Enjoy the location in your mind.

In all cases it is important to keep your attention focused. If external thoughts or distractions wander in, let them drift out. If necessary, visualize attaching the thoughts to objects and then move the objects out of your attention. You may find that your attention keeps breaking as you worry that time is running out. In this case it may be easiest to set an alarm to go off when you should stop meditating. You will find that as you practice meditation your attention will improve.

SOME BRIEF RELAXATION EXERCISES

General Directions:

For all of these exercises, it is best to be seated, eyes closed, feet flat on the floor or crossed at the ankles and hands resting comfortably in the lap. Begin each exercise with a deep breath that you let out gently. As you let it out, feel yourself beginning to relax already. Gentle Arousal: After the exercise, slowly and gently activate by breathing a little more deeply, wiggling your fingers and toes, and opening your eyes at your own rate.

Exercise I:

Tense-Relax. Clench your fists. While keeping them clenched, pull your forearms tightly up against your upper arms. While keeping those muscles tense, tense all the muscles in your legs. While keeping all those tense, clench your jaws and shut your eyes fairly tight - not too tightly. Now, while holding all those tense, take a deep breath and hold it for 5 seconds ... then, let everything go all at once. Feel yourself letting go of all your tensions. Just enjoy that feeling for a minute as your muscles let go more and more.

Actually, if we had a finely-tuned electromyograph hooked up to you measuring the level of tension in your muscles, it would show that you relax more and more and more for up to 20 minutes. Just enjoy focusing, gently, on the letting go (arouse gently).

Exercise II:

Heaviness and Warmth. Just imagine that your feet and legs are getting heavier and heavier and warmer and warmer. It's almost as if you are wearing some lead boots. Feet and legs, heavy and warm, heavy and warm. Now, imagine your stomach and the whole central portion of your body getting warm ... warm and relaxed. My forehead is cool ... cool ... relaxed and cool. And my breathing is regular ... easy and regular. Just feel the warm and heaviness spread all over the body (arouse gently).

Exercise III:

Breathing Your Body Away. Gently focus your attention on your feet and legs. Be aware of all the sensations from your feet and legs. Now, inhale a long, slow breath, and as you do, breathe in all the sensations from your feet and legs. In your mind's eye, imagine that you are erasing this part of your body. Now, as you exhale, breathe out all those sensations. Once again, breathe in your feet and legs, and exhale it from your body, so that, in your mind, you can see only from your hips up. Now, with another long breath, breathe in all the parts of your body to your neck, and, as you exhale, breathe it away.

Now, beginning with your fingers, breathe in your fingers, hands, wrists and arms, and exhale them away ... now, your neck and head. As you breathe in, imagine your neck and head being erased, and now breathe them away. Let's go back over the whole body in one breath, beginning with the feet. A long slow breath in, and as you do, erase any little parts that still remain. Now, a long slow breath out, as you exhale all the remaining parts. Now, just sit quietly for a minute and enjoy feeling yourself relax deeper and deeper (gently arouse).

Exercise IV

A Favorite Scene, Place, or Person. As you're sitting quietly, recall, in your mind, the most relaxing thought you can. Perhaps it's a favorite place (a vacation spot or favorite retreat of some sort; or it might be a person with whom you feel at peace, or some scene -- a meadow, or whatever works for you). Take a few seconds to get that in mind ... now, see or imagine that in your mind. Be sure to feel those good feelings you have when you are in that place. Just let them take over your whole awareness ... If your thoughts wander, just take them gently back to that peaceful, relaxing place (arouse gently).

Exercise V

Ideal Relaxation. With your eyes closed, take a moment to create, in your mind's eye, an ideal spot for relaxation. You can make it any place real or imagined and furnish it any way that you want. Wear the clothes you are most comfortable in. Enjoy, now, in your own mind, going there. You'll want to feel at ease and mellow as you lounge in your ideal place for relaxation. Just enjoy it for a minute ... (gentle arousal).

Exercise VI

Cool Air In, Warm Air Out. With your eyes closed, and while relaxing quietly, gently focus on the end of your nose. As you breathe in, feel the air coming in the tip of your nose. As you breathe out, feel the air coming out of the tip of your nose. Notice that the air coming in is cooler than the air going out. Gently focus on the cool air coming in, and the warm air going out. As your attention wanders, just gently bring it back to the tip of your nose ... (gentle arousal).

Exercise VII

Focus on a Word. Pick some word which has "good" vibrations associated with it for you -- a word which you associate with relaxation, comfort, peace. It could be a word such as "serenity" or "cool, peaceful, joy, free", etc. Now, just let that word hold the center of your thoughts. As your mind wanders to more stressful thoughts, gently bring it back to that word. After a while, perhaps your mind will drift to other gentling, restful thoughts. If so, just let it wander. When it does drift to stressful thoughts, bring it back to your original word (gentle arousal).

Exercise VIII

Something for Use Anywhere. With practice, you will become more adept at relaxing while awake, anywhere. As you do, here's a way to let yourself relax while going about your day. You can do it while walking, sitting in class, taking a test, on a date, etc. First, smile. Yes, smile, to remind yourself that you don't actually have all the cares of the world on your shoulders -- only a few. Then, take a long deep breath, and let it out. Now, take a second long deep breath and as you let it out, feel yourself releasing the tensions in your mind and in your body. Just let yourself relax more and more, as you continue whatever you were doing (gentle arousal).