



Relaxation Strategies

This tool describes the following relaxation strategies, and how they can be used to help feelings of stress and worry:

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This tool has been excerpted from the TEMPO (Tailored, wEb-based, self-Management PrOgram) symptom self-management program. The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by healthcare professionals.

Relaxation strategies involve developing skills that can reduce the effects of stress and reduce tension, worry and anger to help you feel more in control. We suggest **four** main strategies:

1. Controlled diaphragmatic breathing (calm breathing)
2. Progressive muscle relaxation
3. Guided imagery/visualization
4. Mindfulness of the breath
5. Regular physical activity



TOP TIP: Many of these relaxation techniques can be combined – it's a matter of choosing what suits you best. Although these may seem quite simple and straightforward you may find they're not as easy to apply as they first appear! While our suggestions focus on relaxation, there are many other strategies (e.g. thinking techniques, pleasant activities and exercise) that can reduce stress. Feel free to pick from these other strategies, because it is about what works for you.

Find the suggestion right for you:

- ✓ Read the description of each suggestion that follows
- ✓ Choose the strategy or strategies that you prefer
- ✓ Make an action plan to help you fit your preferred suggestion into your daily life
- ✓ Set rewards for the progress you make toward achieving your goal.



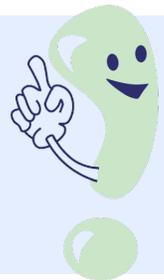
We will now provide step-by-step guidance on how to use these suggestions and will explain how each of these can help you.

Suggestion 1: Controlled diaphragmatic breathing (calm or deep breathing)

What the experts have to say about this suggestion?

Stress takes a toll on our breathing. When we are stressed our breathing becomes shallow and short, which is not the best way to breathe and can prolong feeling stressed. Slow, deep breathing does the opposite, it relaxes the body. This is because when you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down and relax.

TOP TIP: Controlled diaphragmatic breathing should be used as soon as signs of stress occur or hyperventilation (if your breathing speeds up). Practice until it becomes an automatic response when signs of stress occur.

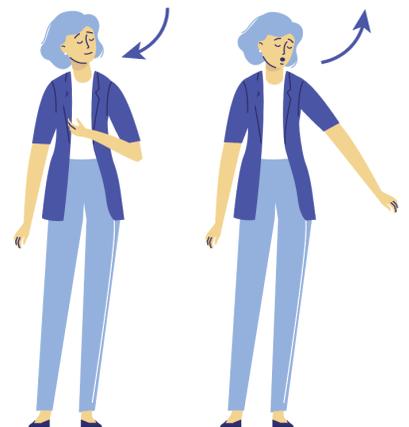


How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Controlled diaphragmatic breathing can be done for just a few minutes, absolutely anywhere! All you have to do is take the deepest breath you can and then let it out. You can practice at the supermarket, in the shower, at the beach, in the doctor's waiting room – wherever you happen to be.

Step 1: Imagine that your stomach is a balloon

- ✓ As you breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, imagine you're inflating and deflating the balloon.
- ✓ When you breathe in, you're filling up the balloon, so your stomach expands. Feel it travel up through your stomach, pushing out your lower ribs, then into your lungs.



- ✓ When you breathe out, you're letting air out of the balloon, so your rib cage and stomach become flatter as breath is released.

Step 2: Pay attention to the timing of your breath

- ✓ While you breathe in, count to three.
- ✓ While you breathe out, count to three.

Step 3: Train your brain

- ✓ Whenever you start to breathe out, say 'relax' to yourself in a calm and soothing way.

Step 4: Put all of these steps together

- ✓ Take a deep breath in, through your nose, taking the full three seconds to fill up your 'balloon.'
- ✓ Without holding your breath, start to breathe out through your mouth, saying 'relax' to yourself and taking the full three seconds to deflate your 'balloon.'
- ✓ Repeat until you feel that you have a good rhythm going, then stop whenever you like.
- ✓ Notice the feeling of tension draining out of your body.
- ✓ Don't be concerned if this is hard to do at first. It's often quite challenging to change breathing patterns, especially if you're worried or stressed for a long period of time.

With practice, you will improve!

What others say about the benefits of controlled diaphragmatic breathing

"Now that I know how to do them, I find the breathing exercises to be great. Before learning deep breathing, I couldn't relax at all. It's really handy to be able to relax when you need to and it's great when you're first diagnosed, to be given strategies for things you can actually do."

Tina, diagnosed with breast cancer.

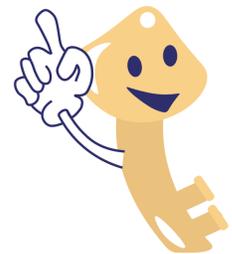
“When you’re stressed, you do tend to forget to breathe and don’t do it. Breathing properly is one of the best things I’ve found to calm me down.”

Rita, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Suggestion 2: Progressive muscle relaxation

What the experts have to say about this suggestion?

When we are stressed the body remains in a constant state of alertness. It wants to fight off or run away from the ‘threat’, even if that threat is just a thought that we can’t be let go of. The brain sends messages to the body telling it that it needs to stay tense and cannot relax until the threat is gone. But when we make the effort to release tension from our bodies, the brain stops sending these messages and the body’s stress response is turned off. Progressive muscle relaxation helps to reduce the tension in your body, leading to a greater sense of comfort.



How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance

Like controlled diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation is particularly helpful for reducing stress and tension. It can also be done for **just a few minutes, almost anywhere and anytime**. Progressive muscle relaxation simply involves tensing and relaxing a muscle or muscle group one at a time.

Steps for progressive muscle relaxation

1. **Get ready.** Set aside 20 to 30 minutes for this exercise if you plan to do it in full, otherwise you can complete just a few steps. Perhaps put on relaxing music and settle into a comfortable position (sitting, standing or lying down). If it helps you feel more relaxed, close your eyes.

2. Start to use controlled diaphragmatic breathing (described on the previous two pages) and practice it for a minute or two before moving on to the next step.
3. Curl your toes downward to tighten your feet. Hold them like this for a full breath in, then relax your toes as you breathe out, remembering to say 'relax' to yourself. **Repeat**
4. Tighten your calf muscles by pulling your toes upwards. Hold them like this for a full breath in, then relax. **Repeat**
5. Squeeze your thigh muscles all the way down to your knees to tighten them. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
6. Squeeze your buttocks together tightly. Hold, then relax. Feel the muscles in your hips and legs go loose and limp. **Repeat**
7. **If you experience lower back pain, skip this step.** Tighten your lower back by arching it. If you're lying down, lift your stomach from the floor. If you're sitting or standing, push your stomach out. Hold it out like this for a full breath in, then relax your back, remembering to say 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out.
Repeat
8. Tighten your stomach muscles by sucking your stomach in. Hold, then relax.
Repeat
9. Tighten your chest muscles by sucking your chest in. Hold, then relax. Feel the tension flowing out of your body as you breathe out. **Repeat**
10. Tighten your hands by clenching your fists. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
11. Tighten your biceps by curling your forearms up toward your shoulders and 'making a muscle' with your arms. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
12. Tighten your triceps by holding your arms straight out in front of you and aiming your hands toward the floor. Hold them like this for a full breath in, then relax your arms, remembering to say 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out. **Repeat**
13. Tighten your shoulder muscles by pushing your shoulders back as though you're trying to make them touch each other behind you. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
14. Tighten your shoulder muscles again by pulling your shoulders forward as though you're trying to make them touch each other in front of you. Hold, then relax.
Repeat

15. Tighten your shoulder muscles again by raising them up as though you're trying to touch your ears with them. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
16. Tighten your neck muscles by **very gently** pulling your head back as though you're trying to touch your back with it. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
17. Tighten your neck muscles again, by **very gently** pulling your head down as though you're trying to touch your chest with it. Hold it like this for a full breath in, then relax your neck, remembering to say 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out. **Repeat.**
18. Tighten your neck muscles again, by **very gently** pushing your head to the left as though you're trying to touch your left shoulder with it. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
19. Tighten your neck muscles again, by **very gently** pushing your head to the right as though you're trying to touch your right shoulder with it. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
20. Tighten your neck and jaw by closing your mouth and pushing your tongue as hard as you can against the roof of your mouth. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
21. Tighten your jaw by opening your mouth as wide as you can. Hold, then relax. Let your lips stay apart and your jaw go loose. **Repeat**
22. Tighten your forehead and eye muscles by frowning and clenching your eyes tightly shut. Hold them like this for a full breath in and then relax your eyes and forehead, remembering to say 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out. **Repeat**
23. Tighten your forehead and eye muscles again by closing your eyes. Gently then raising your eyebrows as high as you can. Hold, then relax. **Repeat**
24. Mentally scan your body for any remaining tension. If a particular area remains tense, repeat one or two tighten-relax cycles for that group of muscles.
25. Notice how loose and heavy your body feels, and imagine a wonderful wave of relaxation washing over your body from the top of your head to your toes. Continue your controlled diaphragmatic breathing for a few minutes.
26. Take your time in easing yourself back into moving around again.

What others say about the benefits of progressive muscle relaxation

“I’ve done relaxation exercises on and off since I was 16 years old, but I’d never seen one called ‘progressive muscle relaxation’ before and given the actual steps. You look at it and say ‘Okay, it’s just squeezing your muscles tight and relaxing them’. It’s a practical approach to relaxation, it isn’t that hard and anyone can do it. And it works; that’s what it’s about.”

Jennifer, wife of Ron, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

“Muscle relaxation is really helpful and useful. I know for a fact that it can calm you right down and make symptoms go away that shouldn’t be there, like a racing heart when you’re stressed.”

Craig, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Suggestion 3: Guided imagery/visualization

What the experts have to say about this suggestion?

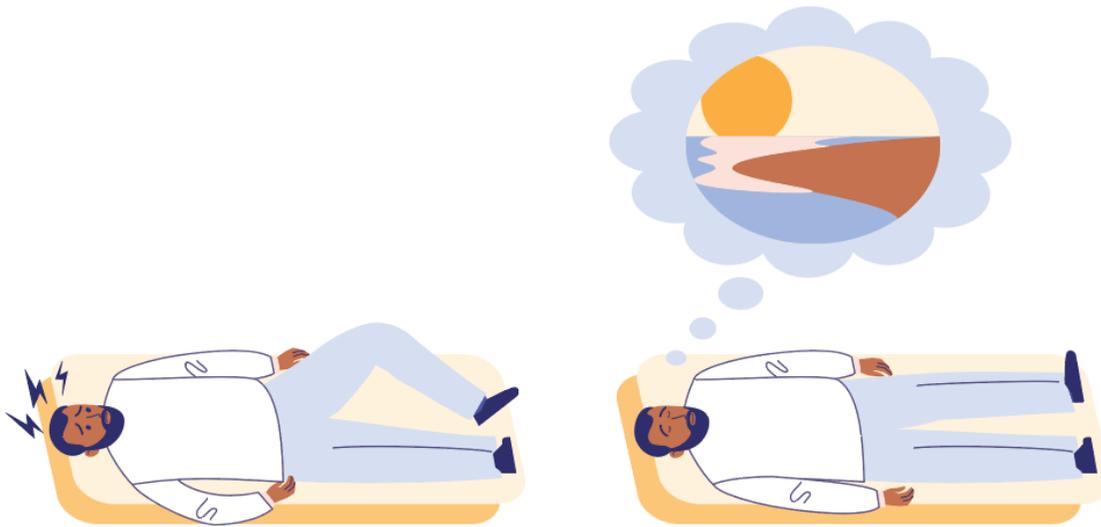
Guided imagery/visualization works because the body responds to imagined events the same way as it does to actual events: you can help your body relax by visualizing positive and comforting images.

How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Guided imagery or visualization takes **only a few minutes** and involves using your imagination to visualize a scene, object or place that you find relaxing, calming or pleasing. In other words, it's a way of doing some vivid daydreaming.

Steps for guided imagery/visualization

1. Settle into a comfortable position and close your eyes.
2. Start to use controlled diaphragmatic breathing, described in Suggestion 1, and do so for a minute or two before moving on to the next step.
3. Start to picture in your mind the most relaxing place you can imagine. This might be a beach in a tropical paradise, where the water is cool and clear, soothing music is playing and there is nothing to do but sip on refreshing fruit juice.
4. As you imagine your scene, try to involve all of your senses. What does it look like? What vivid colours fill the scene? How does it feel? What can you smell? Are there some special scents filling your nose? Do you hear the roar of a fire, the splash of a waterfall, or a bird song? What other sounds can you hear? Make your vision so real that you can see it clearly and even taste it!
5. Stay here for as long as you like.
6. Enjoy your 'surroundings' and imagine yourself far away from the source of your stress. Remember your slow, deep breathing. When you're ready to come back to reality, count back from ten or 20, and tell yourself that when you get to 'one', you'll feel calm and alert, and enjoy the rest of your day.



What others say about the benefits of guided imagery/visualization

“Visualizing the ocean and stuff like that is good for me. When you have cancer, you’re overwhelmed with a lot of information, but visualization helps you focus, clear your mind and totally relax. Afterwards, you feel like you can cope better. Like you’ve gone ‘Okay, all that tension is gone’. Because it builds up and emotionally it’s very difficult, so to have that resource and incorporate it with your deep breathing is great. It really helps when anxiety kicks in and takes over.”

Therese, partner of Joseph, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

“I started using mindfulness in the car on the way to chemo treatment — obviously my husband was driving! I found it really helped me overcome my nerves about treatment, and then I started using it at other times, whenever I felt things were getting too much. My daughter commented that I seemed much calmer and I feel as though it has helped me to slow down rather than think catastrophic thoughts.”

May, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Suggestion 4: Mindfulness of the breath

What the experts have to say about this suggestion?

Mindfulness allows you to reconnect with the present and provides a break from some of the things that worry you, giving you a chance to gain some understanding about the way things are at the moment.

How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Mindfulness of the breath takes **only a few minutes** and involves relaxing by focusing carefully on your breath. You can practice mindfulness during daily tasks, such as washing the dishes, waiting for the bus, or going to bed at night. Whatever you're doing, concentrate on how all your senses are experiencing the activity; really notice the details.

Steps for mindfulness of the breath

1. Sit comfortably by placing your feet flat on the floor and your hands in your lap. If you find it uncomfortable to sit, you can lie down. Close your eyes, or keep them open and focus on a fixed point.
2. Turn your attention to your breathing. The aim is not to change your breathing, just to focus on your breath. Notice the breath as it enters your body and fills your stomach. Follow it all the way in, and all the way out. Try focusing on a particular sensation; the rise and fall of your chest or stomach or the flow of air as it enters your nose. You'll find that your mind wanders away from your breath; just observe where your mind has gone and gently bring your attention back to your breathing again.
3. Continue to focus on your breath for a few moments. Each time your mind wanders, notice your thoughts and bring yourself back to the breath.
4. When you feel relaxed, slowly bring your attention back to where you are and to what's happening around you. Remember that you can bring your attention back to your breathing at any time during the day when you're feeling tense or stressed.

Suggestion 5: Doing regular physical activity

What the experts have to say about this suggestion?

Physical activity produces endorphins, which are chemicals in the brain that act as natural painkillers and sometimes referred to as the “feel-good neurotransmitter”. Exercising can also help you get your mind off the day’s hassles and help you to relax. Exercise can improve your sleep, which might be disrupted by anxiety and stress.

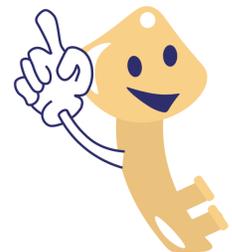
How do I use this suggestion? Step-by-step guidance.

Manage feelings of anxiety by doing regular physical activity.

Remember to talk to your health care team before you begin any new physical activity plan. Ask about when you can start, and what type and intensity of physical activity is best for you.

Key Points: Reducing tension, anger and stress

1. Stress is a typical reaction to demanding situations. It may be accompanied by emotions such as tension, worry, nervousness, anger, frustration, or sadness.
2. Relaxation techniques are a useful way to calm your mind and body.
3. Relaxation techniques often focus on changing your breathing and focusing your mind.
4. Relaxation techniques can be done just about anywhere.



Additional resources for managing tension, anger and stress

Stress, Anxiety and Depression:

- http://www.cmha.ca/mental_health/stress/#.WT1ZY2jyvIU
- <http://www.cancer.ca/en/cancer-information/cancer-journey/living-with-cancer/stress/?region=on>
- <https://www.cancerandwork.ca/healthcare-providers/cancers-impact-on-work/effects-stress/>
- <https://www.cancercare.on.ca/common/pages/UserFile.aspx?fileId=357443>

Meditation:

- <https://www.anxietybc.com/sites/default/files/CalmBreathing.pdf>
- <https://www.mcgill.ca/counselling/self-help/audio-video>
- <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/multimedia/meditation>