

Deep Relaxation

Deep relaxation is an important part of a stress reduction program. Highly stressed people often have difficulty relaxing, and this can be a challenge in teaching this technique. For some people, deep relaxation makes them aware of just how stressed they are which is a first step in managing stress. Introduce deep relaxation so that people don't feel that they have failed in some way if they are unable to relax. Let students know that even though we call this exercise "deep relaxation", relaxation takes practice (you might call it something else). Whatever one experiences in deep relaxation is valuable.

Principles of Adapting Deep Relaxation

- Deep relaxation can be done sitting or lying down
- Introduce the process and benefits of deep relaxation
- Emphasize that relaxation takes practice
- Whatever they experience is fine; this is a good opportunity for self-awareness
- You can go through the body from head to toe, naming small parts; then go back through the body from bottom to top naming larger parts
- Consider using guided imagery, visualization or music to help people focus
- Adjust the timing as needed for the structure of the workshop
- Let participants know that there will be periods of silence; shorter periods of silence (1–2 min) may be best
- Observe the group and respond accordingly

Benefits of Deep Relaxation

Explaining the benefits can help motivate people to practice regularly and re-learn to be relaxed. In deep relaxation, we enable the body and mind to rest, repair, and rejuvenate. Also called "Progressive Muscle Relaxation¹", it is a systematic way to reconnect with their peaceful center. If a person can feel, even for a few minutes, the comfort of deep relaxation, it is proof of the ability to tap into that at any time. It shows that stress and tension are superficial, passing phenomena. This is the greatness of the yogic approach to stress management: it is possible to experience immediate release from stress, at least during the period of practice. With regular practice this freedom from stress gets longer and deeper.

Deep Relaxation:

- Releases muscle tension
- Slows down the body and calms the mind
- Initiates the relaxation response which decreases the stress response
- Allows the body to rest deeply
- Creates a state that fosters physical and mental healing
- Increases energy
- Facilitates mental and emotional balance

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**"I want you to prepare a dynamic, intense, powerful,
energy-charged Relaxation Workshop!"**

Adapting Deep Relaxation

Classic Integral Yoga® deep relaxation moves from the physical to the subtle. It leads to an experience of inner quiet and calm. For detailed instruction on classic deep relaxation, please refer to the *Basic Integral Yoga Hatha* Manual.

Significant adaptation of the standard Integral Yoga deep relaxation may be necessary for highly stressed people. If you begin by relaxing the feet, their stressful thoughts may have distracted them by the time you get to the knees. It is important to ground the student in the sensations of the body to help them get out of the racing mind.

Consider these variations:

Order

Start by scanning the body from the head to the toes. Relaxing the head helps remove some of the distracting mental agitation, or relax the hands, tongue, and eyes. These parts have lots of nerves, so relaxing them helps relax the whole nervous system. Afterwards you can go through the whole body. You can scan the body more than once in different directions.

Detail

You can name the parts in finer detail to engage the mind more (e.g. each finger of the right hand, back of the hand, palm, etc.). If you do a second body scan, name larger parts ("fingers, hand"). When watching the breath, have them look for tension in the nose, throat, chest, etc. This takes time, but we often reduce the time in silence, leaving more time for the body and breath scans.

Pacing

If you name smaller parts, go faster. With larger parts, slow a little.

Tone

You may use a more conversational tone. Vary your voice to keep a person from drifting off to think about their problems. In some work settings a "dreamy" voice would be considered unprofessional and might cause some suspicion ("Are you trying to hypnotize us?").

Imagery vs. Watching Thoughts

If asked to watch thoughts, compulsive thinking can begin again. You may use imagery to replace stressful thoughts. (See Guided Imagery and Visualization p. 118).

Silence

It can be very uncomfortable lying down for several minutes of silence if your mind is miserable with stress. It's better to have something positive to do with your mind. You may say, "Now we'll be silent for a short time. You can mentally scan the body again, or observe and relax your breath. If you're feeling relaxed, you can simply observe the pleasant feeling of peace within." By giving them choices, people who can't relax don't feel like a failure. You may remain silent for a minute or two. It can be longer if the group seems very relaxed.

Position

In a setting where people are seated, deep relaxation can be done right in the chair. Sometimes people even fall asleep sitting up (be alert for risky slouching). If lying down, consider having the knees bent (with support). You may even give permission to roll onto your side with your eyes closed (quietly!) if you notice a number of people squirming on their backs.

Other Considerations

Some people may not be comfortable closing their eyes or being silent for several minutes. Suggest softening the gaze or gazing down at the floor if people do not want to close their eyes. Consider including music to help people engage.

Imagery to “Watch the Breath” in Deep Relaxation

- Breath enters nostrils and meets in eyebrow center
- Moves in one nostril out the other
- Count down from (54, 27, 20)
- Navel to throat breathing, see as breeze, etc.
- Relax the breath at:
 - ◊ Nostrils, throat, collar bones, sternum (breastbone), chest, tummy (abdomen)
 - ◊ Pause after each
- Mentally see each part letting go

Imagery to Replace “Watching the Thoughts” in Deep Relaxation

Picture a scene in nature: beach, hillside, mountain, meadow, river bank etc. See soothing, healing energy going to (name body parts in order) making them strong and healthy.

From *Yoga Nidra* by Swami Satyananda Saraswati of the Bihar School of Yoga:

- Prana streams in feet to head, head to feet, again feet to head, silver strand/thread along the spine suspended in that space, see seven pearls of light along that silver thread
- Name from bottom up: first chakra, second etc to seven
- On reverse see them light up

Neutral Imagery Script

Now I invite you to imagine yourself in a place that’s very beautiful to you, very peaceful, and very safe. Maybe it’s a secret garden or a mountain meadow that only you know about. Or a beautiful room. Anyplace is ok as long as the place is pleasant to you... peaceful...and safe.

Look around and notice what you see in this special, quiet place. It might be trees or furnishings in a room. Notice the colors and the shapes and the things that you see there. *(Pause 10–15 sec)*

Be aware of any sounds in this peaceful place, like a breeze in the trees. Or perhaps it’s just very quiet. *(Pause 10–15 sec)*

You may sense an aroma, a fragrance in the air. And it’s ok if you don’t. Just enjoy any aroma you may notice, and at any time you can let go of anything you don’t enjoy. *(Pause 10–15 sec)*

Notice the pleasant temperature...perhaps the time of day.... *(Pause 10–20 sec)*

Notice any feelings of any kind you have, and give them all permission to be there. You can witness any feeling in safety, and allow it to come up and pass through you without the need to react, or identify with that feeling. *(Pause 10–20 sec)*

Notice any deeper feelings of peacefulness, strength, or comfort that you may feel. Allow them to be there. Let yourself to relax into them and enjoy them. *(Pause 10–20 sec)*

(Hum, or sound a gentle chime if appropriate, to gently bring them out of relaxation)
Now...bring your awareness back to your gentle breath.

Deep Relaxation Suggestions and Imagery

Imagery and positive suggestions can be combined with deep relaxation to reduce critical, negative thinking. Relaxation opens the mind to suggestion. Create images that you enjoy and that uplift you.

Here are a few ways to use deep relaxation imagery in deep relaxation:

For Mentally Rehearsing Low Stress in Work and Performance

Imagine yourself working with calmness and enthusiasm while you enjoy your task right now. Imagine the happiness of those who will benefit from your effort. Feel that you will be safe and happy whether you succeed or fail. It's all for fun. See yourself as an instrument in the hands of a higher power while you work. Work is worship. For public speaking or performing: Picture the audience as friends who want you to succeed. Imagery for taking exams: See a door open in the mind, allowing the information you learned to flow easily from the subconscious. See yourself passing with ease.

For Overcoming Addictions

See yourself in situations where you usually smoke, drink, overeat, get angry etc. Feel any discomfort in the body that this situation brings up. Breathe into that discomfort, and relax it without judgment or self-criticism. Imagine yourself physically and mentally calm, relaxed and detached in that situation with no need or desire to smoke, overeat, or drink alcohol. See yourself with positive options to feel happy and get your needs met. Imagine a higher power protecting and guiding you.

For Reducing Stress and Tension

Relax the body parts over and over progressively. Imagine every part is healthy and functioning well.

In the Treatment of Insomnia

Create peaceful, restful images in the mind, while letting go of each part of the body. Feel you are safe in a natural setting.

To Overcome Worry

Feel that you are the witness of the movie of your own life. It's so entertaining! Invite a wise person to give you guidance. Imagine a positive outcome in great detail.

For Flowing with Life's Problems

See everything in life coming from the hand of a loving higher power. Affirm "It's all for good". "This is part of life and I accept it. Even death is inevitable, I can accept it with balance". "This difficult event is happening now. Can I change it? Leave it? Accept it?"

To Raise Self-esteem, Reduce Conflict, Heal from Abuse

- God (or some beloved figure) loves me right now, exactly as I am
- As the inner witness, I am beyond good and bad. I forgive the mistakes of my body/mind
- Forgive those who hurt you, because they did it out of ignorance; see them going farther and farther away
- Negative people were not important in my life; their opinion is trivial