

Time to Relax

Angela Stock, DPT
Doctor of Physical Therapy
Andover Physical Therapy

Has being stressed become part of your daily routine? Stress is defined as physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension and is a normal part of everyone's life. The way people react to stress can vary considerably and can be undesirable such as increased muscle tension, increased anxiety, or tension headaches. While sometimes we are unable to eliminate the sources of stress in our lives, we can practice various relaxation techniques to help lessen the discomfort and duration of symptoms and stress.

Here is a simple breathing technique that can be practiced just about anywhere. Sit with your back straight in a comfortable chair. Breathe out completely through your mouth. Breathe in with your mouth closed for a count of eight. Repeat this three times. Another breathing exercise that is quite simple is to let out a deep sigh of relief pushing the air out of your lungs. Don't think about breathing in again, just let the air come back naturally. You can repeat this last method as often as needed.

Exercise is a great outlet for relieving tension. Prior to entering a difficult situation or if you have already built up a lot of tension, go for a brisk walk around your desk at work, in the hallway, or up and down the stairs. This can give you the time you may need, provide an outlet for muscle tension and allows more oxygen to enter your body.

Another technique involves making you aware of your tension so you are able to recognize and release it. This exercise should be performed in a comfortable chair or laying down following the same sequence slowly for each body part. The first thing will be to tense/tighten the muscles you are focusing on for 15 seconds. Then you will relax/loosen the muscles and concentrate on the sensation you feel noticing the difference between the tensed and the relaxed state. Start with your feet then move slowly to your calves, thighs, stomach, bottom, chest, back, shoulders, hands, arms, neck, and finally your face. Breathe slowly, regularly, and deeply during this procedure. Be sure to get up slowly following any relaxation exercise to prevent dizziness.

The above suggestions are quick and easy methods that may help you avoid unwanted tension. Other alternatives for relaxation include removing yourself from the source of stress by taking a vacation, getting a massage, using biofeedback to help you learn to control the tightness in particular muscles, soothing music, a warm bath, or just taking time for yourself to be alone. Maintaining a healthy diet, a regular exercise program, and a healthy balanced lifestyle will help reduce the stress that will make you need to use these relaxation techniques.