

Using Relaxation To Stabilize Moods

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Learning to release the tension in my body has been such a gift. I can use relaxation any time and it's free.

Relaxation and Mental Health

More and more people are using relaxation techniques—also referred to as meditation—to make themselves feel much, much better. The value of deep relaxation in achieving wellness is also being recognized increasingly by the medical community. Research shows that the benefits of practicing relaxation techniques increase dramatically over time. Many studies have found that regular relaxation can speed psychotherapy, lessen chemical addiction, and decrease anxiety.

People in the study noted that they use relaxation techniques to lift themselves out of depression and to alleviate mania (sometimes only temporarily—but any kind of break helps). Relaxation is particularly successful at decreasing the agitation that is often a warning signal of an impending mood swing.

To be able to use relaxation techniques during a crisis, it's essential to learn how to relax when you're stable (it's pretty much impossible to learn relaxation when you're either

too high or too low). Relaxation techniques can be a valuable resource in helping you work through difficult times and in lowering your stress level on an ongoing basis. The first step is to learn how to relax. In our fast-paced society, this is not as easy as it sounds.

Learning To Relax

Because relaxation is being recognized as such an important adjunct to good health, you have many resources available for learning the state of the art in relaxation techniques. Read and practice the relaxation techniques described later in this chapter. You may also want to utilize any or all of the following supplementary tools.

Take a relaxation or meditation course. Such courses are now available in most geographical areas and are often free. In my area, a relaxation class was recently sponsored by the local hospital. Learning with others, and under the guidance of an instructor, is an excellent way to learn how to relax or meditate. Look for courses in the community calendar section of your local newspaper. Also check with your local hospital or mental health hotline (see the Resource List at the end of this workbook).

Use an instructional video. In my area, one can borrow excellent videos from the hospice office and the library on how to relax. Relaxation and meditation tapes may also be available for rent at your local video store. Several excellent relaxation videos are for sale (see the Resource List).

Listen to audio relaxation tapes. See lists of audio tapes at the back of this book. Relaxation tapes are also sometimes available at health food stores. I recommend that you buy several of these tapes. They can really help you relax at those times when it is most difficult.

Make your own audio tapes. Use the exercises in this book, or develop your own versions. You may still want to get a commercially produced tape to use as a model.

Check out other resources. There are many excellent books on learning how to relax. These are also listed in the Resource List. Some of these are available at libraries.

I, _____ (your name), am committed to learning how to relax, and to practice daily, so that these skills will be available to me when I need them.

These are the resources I'm going to use to learn how to relax:

For any method of relaxation or meditation to be effective, you must practice daily at a regular time. I practice relaxation techniques for 15 minutes before I get out of bed in the morning and for 15 minutes before I go to sleep (sometimes it puts me to sleep). I also try to practice for half an hour after lunch, but my schedule does not always allow for this. You will figure out for yourself the times when your house or workplace is most quiet, and when you can take a 15-minute break without interruption. Ask your family or co-workers to respect this time by keeping quiet and not disturbing you.

Locate a space or several spaces that are cozy, comfortable, and quiet. This might be in a corner, in your living room, a window seat in your bedroom, or the luncheon room at work. It's also possible to relax out of doors, in a secluded place in the woods, near a meadow, stream, by the ocean, or on a mountaintop. Churches, which are often open and empty on weekdays, are wonderful, quiet places where you can practice relaxation techniques.

Some people like to make their relaxation space special by adorning it with comfortable cushions, pictures, flowers, and candles. The only hard-and-fast rules are to make sure that the space is quiet, that you are comfortable there, and that you will not be disturbed.

I will practice relaxation in the following place or places: _____

Set up a two-week trial period to determine how regular periods of deep relaxation will affect your life.

For two weeks I will relax _____ times daily at the following times: _____

How I felt before I began this relaxation program: _____

How I felt after I completed the two-week relaxation program: _____

Based on what I learned through the trial period, I am going to take the following action regarding structured periods of relaxation:

I am going to practice my relaxation techniques every day at the following times:

If you miss a session now and again, don't fret. Just do the best you can. Practice relaxing until it becomes second nature, and until you can use the technique any time you begin to feel nervous, tense, or irritable.

When you notice danger signs that you are getting either manic or depressed, spend more time using your relaxation techniques and practice more often during the day. At these times, it can be salvational to use an audio or video tape that has a guided meditation exercise (you may be too subject to distraction to meditate or relax on your own).

Relaxation Techniques

Breathing

Proper breathing habits and simple breathing exercises relax the body and mind. People who practice these exercises daily, either by themselves or before beginning a meditation session with others, find that breathing properly can alleviate depression and mania, enhance the meditation experience, and create a greater sense of overall well-being. Read through the techniques described below and decide which might work best for you. You may want to try them all.

Breathing Awareness

Lie down on the floor with your legs flat or bent at the knees, your arms at your sides, your palms up, and your eyes closed. Breathe through your nose if you can. Focus on your breathing. Place your hand on the place that seems to rise and fall the most as you breathe. If this place is on your chest, you will need to practice breathing more deeply so your abdomen rises and falls most noticeably. (When we are nervous or anxious, we tend to breathe short, shallow breaths in the upper chest.) Now place both hands on your abdomen and notice how it rises and falls with each breath. Notice if your chest is moving in harmony with your abdomen. Continue to do this for several minutes. Get up slowly. This

exercise is something you can do during a break at work. If you can't lie down, you can do it sitting in a chair.

How I felt before I did the breathing awareness exercise:

How I felt after doing the breathing awareness exercise:

Practice deep breathing every day for two weeks, then assess how it's affecting your moods and state of mind.

How I felt after practicing the breathing awareness exercise once or twice a day for two weeks:

Deep Breathing

This exercise can be practiced in a variety of body positions; however, it's most effective if you can do it lying down with your knees bent and your spine straight. After lying down, scan your body for tension. Place one hand on your abdomen and one hand on your chest. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose into your abdomen to push up your hand as much as it feels comfortable. Your chest should only move a little in response to the movement in your abdomen. When you feel at ease with your breathing, inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, making a relaxing whooshing sound as you gently blow out. This will relax your mouth, tongue, and jaw. Continue taking long, slow, deep breaths that raise and lower your abdomen. As you become more and more relaxed, focus on the sound and feeling of your breathing. Continue this deep breathing for five to ten minutes at a time, once or twice a day. At the end of each session, scan your body for tension. As you become used to this exercise, you can practice it wherever you happen to be, in a standing, sitting or supine position. Use the exercise whenever you feel tense.

How I felt before I did the deep breathing exercise:

How I felt after doing the deep breathing exercise:

Practice deep breathing awareness every day for two weeks, then assess how it's

affecting your moods and state of mind.

How I felt after doing the deep breathing exercise once or twice a day for two weeks:

The Relaxing Sigh

Do you notice yourself sighing or yawning during the day? This is usually a sign that you are not breathing deeply enough to get enough oxygen. The sigh or yawn helps to remedy the situation and also releases tension. When you feel the need to relax, sit or stand up straight. Sigh deeply, letting out a sound of deep relief as the air rushes out of your lungs. Then let the air return to your lungs slowly and naturally. Repeat eight to twelve times whenever you feel tense or anxious.

How I felt before I did the relaxing sigh exercise:

How I felt after doing the relaxing sigh exercise:

Practice the relaxing sigh every day for two weeks, then assess how it's affecting your moods and state of mind.

How I felt after doing the relaxing sigh exercise once or twice a day for two weeks:

Complete Natural Breathing

This way of breathing will become second nature as you practice it.

Sit or stand up straight. Breathe through your nose. While inhaling, fill the lower section of your lungs (your diaphragm will push your abdomen out to make more room for the air). Now fill the middle part of your lungs with air as your lower ribs and your chest move forward slightly. Then fill the upper part of your lungs with air as you raise your chest slightly and draw in your abdomen a little. With practice these steps can be performed in one continuous, smooth inhalation in a few seconds. Hold your breath for a few seconds. Exhale slowly, pulling your abdomen in slightly and lifting it up slowly as your lungs empty. When you have exhaled completely, relax your abdomen and chest. Repeat this sequence at least five times, raising your shoulders and collarbone occasionally after the inhalation to be sure that the very top of your lungs is filled with fresh air.

Purifying Breath

This exercise cleans your lungs while stimulating and toning your entire breathing process and refreshing your body. It can be used with the other breathing exercises.

Sit or stand up straight. Inhale a complete natural breath, as described in the previous exercise. Hold this breath for several seconds. Exhale a little of the air with force through a small opening in your lips. Stop exhaling for a moment, then blow out more air. Repeat this procedure until you have exhaled the air. Practice for several minutes.

Tap Away Tension

This is a good exercise to relax you quickly while making you feel more alert.

Stand up straight with your hands at your sides. As you inhale slowly, lightly tap your chest with your fingertips, moving your hand around so that your entire chest is tapped. When you have inhaled as much air as feels comfortable, hold your breath and pat your chest with your palms. Exhale using the purifying breath described in the previous exercise. Practice a few more purifying breaths and then repeat the tap-away-tension exercise as many times as it feels comfortable. After you have repeated this exercise several times, try tapping the areas of your back that you can reach with your hands.

tension exercise:

How I felt before I tried complete natural breathing, the purifying breath exercise, and the tap-away-

How I felt after trying these exercises:

How I felt before I tried the bracer, the windmill, and the bending exercises:

How I felt after trying these exercises:

Practice the bracer, windmill, and bending exercises every day for two weeks, then assess how you feel.

How I felt after practicing these exercises every day for two weeks:

Complete Natural Breathing and Imagination

Lying down, place your hands on your solar plexus (across your lower ribs) and practice complete natural breathing for several minutes. Imagine that with each incoming breath, energy is rushing into your lungs and being immediately stored in your solar plexus. As you exhale, imagine that this energy is flowing to all parts of your body. Practice daily for at least five to ten minutes. You can also use this exercise to imagine sending energy to a place in your body where there is pain, moving one hand from your solar plexus to the place on your body that hurts.

Alternate Breathing

This is an excellent relaxation exercise. Some people also find that it alleviates tension and sinus headaches.

Sit in a comfortable position with good posture. Rest the index and second finger of your right hand on your forehead. Close your right nostril with your thumb. Inhale slowly and soundlessly through your left nostril. Close your left nostril with your ring finger while opening your right nostril by removing your thumb. Exhale slowly, quietly, and as thoroughly as possible through your right nostril. Inhale through your left nostril. Close your right nostril with your thumb and uncover your left nostril. Exhale then inhale through your left nostril. Begin by doing five cycles of alternate breathing. Gradually increase the number of cycles to ten or twenty-five.

How I felt before I tried complete natural breathing and imagination, and alternate breathing exercises:

How I felt after I did these exercises:

Practice complete natural breathing and imagination, and the alternate breathing exercises every day for two weeks, then assess what effect they've had on your moods and your state of mind.

How I felt after practicing these exercises every day for two weeks:

Many of these exercises are adapted from yogic breathing techniques, and can be practiced and perfected by taking a yoga class (yoga classes are available in most communities around the country).

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

The purpose of progressive muscle relaxation is to focus on body sensations and how relaxation feels by systematically tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups in your body. Make a tape recording of this exercise so that you can use it when you need to. Be sure you leave yourself time on the tape to tense and relax your muscles.

Find a quiet space where you will not be disturbed. You can do this exercise either lying on your back or sitting in a chair, as long as you are comfortable.

Close your eyes. Now clench your right fist as tightly as you can. Be aware of the tension as you do so. Keep your fist clenched for a moment. Now relax. Feel the looseness in your right hand and compare it to the tension you felt previously. Tense your right fist again, then relax it; notice the difference between tension and relaxation.

Now clench your left fist as tightly as you can. Be aware of the tension as you do so. Keep your fist clenched for a moment. Now relax. Feel the looseness in your left hand and compare it to the tension you felt previously. Tense your left fist again, relax it, and again notice the difference.

Bend your elbows and tense your biceps as hard as you can. Notice the feeling of tightness. Relax and straighten out your arms. Let the relaxation flow through your arms and compare it to the tightness you felt before. Tense and relax your biceps again.

Wrinkle your forehead as tightly as you can. Now relax it and let it smooth out. Feel your forehead and scalp becoming relaxed. Now frown and notice the tension spreading through your forehead again. Relax and allow your forehead to become smooth.

Close your eyes now and squint them very tightly. Feel the tension. Now relax your eyes. Tense and relax your eyes again. Now let them remain gently closed.

Now clench your jaw, bite hard, and feel the tension. Now relax your jaw. Your lips will be slightly parted. Notice the difference. Clench and relax again.

Press your tongue against the roof of your mouth. Now relax. Do this again.

Press and purse your lips together. Now relax them. Repeat this.

Feel the relaxation throughout your forehead, scalp, eyes, jaw, tongue, and lips.

Hold your head back as far as it can comfortably go and observe the tightness in your neck. Roll your head to the right and notice how the tension moves and changes. Roll your head to the left and notice how the tension moves and changes. Now straighten your head and bring it forward, pressing your chin against your chest. Notice the tension in your throat and the back of your neck. Now relax and allow your shoulders to return to a comfortable position. Allow yourself to feel more and more relaxed. Now shrug your shoulders and hunch your head down between them. Relax your shoulders. Allow them to drop back, and feel the relaxation moving through your neck, throat, and shoulders; feel the lovely, very deep relaxation.

Give your whole body a chance to relax. Feel how comfortable and heavy it is. Breathe in and fill you lungs completely. Hold you breath and notice the tension. Let your breath out and let your chest become loose. Continue relaxing, breathing gently in and out. Repeat this breathing several times and notice the tension draining out of your body.

Tighten your stomach and hold the tightness. Feel the tension. Now relax your stomach. Place your hand on your stomach and breathe deeply into your stomach, pushing your hand up. Hold for a moment and then relax. Now arch your back without straining, keeping the rest of your body as relaxed as possible. Notice the tension in your lower back. Now relax deeper and deeper.

Tighten your buttocks and thighs. Flex your thighs by pressing your heels down as hard as you can. Relax and notice the difference. Do this again. Curl your toes down, making your calves tense. Notice the tension. Relax. Bend your toes toward your face, creating tension in your shins. Relax and notice the difference.

Feel the heaviness throughout your lower body as the relaxation gets deeper and deeper. Relax your feet, ankles, calves, shins, knees, thighs, and buttocks. Let the relaxation spread to your stomach, lower back, and chest. Let go more and more. Experience deeper and deeper relaxation in your shoulders, arms, and hands, deeper and deeper. Notice the feeling of looseness and relaxation in your neck, jaws, and all your facial muscles.

How I felt before I did the progressive relaxation exercise:

How I felt afterwards:

Practice progressive muscle relaxation every day for two weeks; then see whether it's made a difference in the way you feel.

How I felt after practicing progressive muscle relaxation once or twice a day for two weeks:

Body Scan

This exercise will help you become more aware of how you are feeling right now. As you become aware of your body, mind, and emotions in a nonjudgmental way, you will begin to experience a new clarity and self-acceptance that will help you relax deeply. Do your very best not to judge yourself as you are doing this exercise. Just allow yourself to complete the body scan without worrying about the results.

Get into a comfortable position, either sitting up or lying down in a place where you won't be disturbed.

Gently close your eyes and focus your complete attention on your breathing. Notice the cool air as it is breathed in through your nose, and the warm air as it is breathed out. Focus your full attention on each breath, cool air being breathed in, warm air being breathed out. Just breathe naturally, noticing each breath. Let each breath flow into the next without

trying to make anything happen. If your mind strays away from your breath with thoughts about something else, just bring your focus gently back to the breath.

Focus all your attention on your feet and toes. Simply notice how they are feeling. Now, with all your attention on your toes and feet, allow these areas to relax, release, and then let go. Don't try to make anything happen—just allow it to happen.

Focus your attention on your legs—the lower legs, knees, and upper legs. Notice how they are feeling without making any judgment. Are there any sensations in your legs—tightness, tingling, itching, warmth, cold? Feel whatever it is you feel. Now allow your legs to fully and completely relax. Just let go and let them relax.

Focus your attention on your buttocks and lower abdomen. Notice how they feel. Comfortable, warm, relaxed, loose, whatever. Just notice how they feel. Are there any tight or tense areas? With your mind completely focused on these areas, allow them to fully and completely relax.

Focus your attention on your stomach, chest, and back. Notice any sensations in these areas. Is there any tightness or discomfort present? Feel whatever it is you feel in these areas. Then let go, simply and completely let go.

Now put your full attention on how your hands, arms, shoulders, and neck are feeling. Are there areas of discomfort here? Notice and feel whatever you feel. Then, simply and completely, let go.

Focus your attention on your mouth, nose, face, eyes and head. Are you experiencing any tightness or discomfort in these areas? Completely feel whatever you are feeling. Relax your mouth, nose, face, eyes, and head. Your jaw and eyelids may begin to droop with relaxation.

Notice how the relaxation is penetrating every organ, every muscle, and every cell of your body. Let your whole body and mind completely relax. Enjoy this feeling of deep relaxation throughout your body. Notice how good it feels. Appreciate yourself for allowing this to happen.

Focus your attention again on your breath, noticing the cool air come in as you inhale, and the warm air go out as you exhale. Stay focused on each breath as it goes in and out, breath by breath. Notice how relaxed, refreshed, and energetic you feel. This relaxation and feeling of renewed energy will stay with you as you get on with the things you do. Slowly get up and resume your activities. Remember that each time you do this exercise, you will relax more fully and deeply, continuing to enhance your wellness.

How I felt before I did the body scan exercise:

How I felt after I did the body scan exercise:

Practice the body scan exercise every day for two weeks; then assess how this practice has affected your moods and state of mind.
How I felt after doing the body scan exercise once or twice a day for two weeks:

Meditation

Meditation is described in *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* as "the practice of uncritically attempting to focus your attention on one thing at a time." You can choose to meditate on anything that appeals to you. Gazing at an object, such as the second hand on a wristwatch, a candle flame, a flower, or a favorite picture, will focus your attention. Or you may choose to repeat, either aloud or to yourself, a syllable, word, or group of words. It can be helpful before meditating to bring yourself into a quieter frame of mind by reading an inspiring passage from a book that means a great deal to you. I sometimes use this quote from *The Power of Myth* by Joseph Campbell:

One thing that comes out of myths is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.

Some people refer to Kahlil Gibran's chapter "On Love" in *The Prophet*. You might spend a few moments studying a flower, plant, rock, piece of jewelry, or picture. Use your creativity and you will come up with plenty of inspirations to launch your meditation. As you attempt to focus your mind, you will find that it wanders from one thought to another. When you realize this, notice the new thought, then bring your focus back.

How To Meditate

The following step-by-step instructions will show you how to begin.

Select a position that is comfortable for you:

- Sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor, your knees relaxed, and your hands resting in your lap.

For some meditations in which you are not gazing at a particular object, you may close your eyes, or keep them focused on a particular spot on the floor or wall. Maintain the meditation for as long as feels comfortable to you. You can start out with just a five-minute meditation. As you become more accustomed to meditating, you will want to spend more time—up to 20 or 30 minutes, twice a day, at regularly scheduled times. You may want to find a group to meditate with on a regular basis.

You may want to spend some time practicing the process of letting go of intrusive thoughts. I often do this when I am having a hard time quieting down enough to sleep. Take several deep breaths. As you have a thought or perception, imagine that you are enclosing that thought or perception in a bubble. Then just watch the bubble float away. You may think of other images that are easier for you to use, such as puffs of smoke or leaves floating down a stream.

Maintain a passive attitude when meditating. Remember that you will have many intrusive thoughts when you first begin to meditate, but your moments of fixed attention will increase as your ability to let go of stray thoughts improves. Don't worry about whether you are doing things correctly or well enough. Realize that whatever happens is what is supposed to happen.

Take several deep breaths and notice your breathing. Notice whether your breathing is fast or slow, deep or shallow, and where your breath goes in your body (high up in your chest, near your stomach, or down low in your abdomen). Now practice moving your breath from one place to another, breathing first into your chest, then down into your stomach area, then down into the lower parts of your torso. Notice your abdomen expanding and contracting. This deep breath is the most relaxing one to use when meditating. This may be hard at first, but it will become easier as you practice.

Now spend several minutes getting in touch with yourself. With your eyes closed, focus on the places where your body touches the chair, cushion, or floor. Notice what this feels like. Now notice those places where one body part touches another. Pay attention to the sensations at these places of contact. Notice how much space your body takes up. Feel the boundary between your body and the space around it.

Your back should be comfortably straight with the weight of your head balanced on top of your spinal column (pull your chin in a bit) and an arch in the small of your back. Now rock from side to side and from front to back until your torso feels balanced on your hips. Close your mouth, breathe through your nose, and have your tongue in the roof of your mouth.

- Sit cross-legged, tailor fashion, on the floor, with a cushion under your bottom.
- Kneel on a cushion, with another cushion between your feet and the floor.

Different Styles of Meditation

There are many different ways to meditate—but all ways lead to the same result. Choose the style or styles you think you will most likely be able to practice on a regular basis. I use all of the meditations described below, and find them to be very helpful in stabilizing my moods. I have found that I can use these techniques to relax myself in many different situations, not just when I am in a quiet place and in the right position—such as before surgery or other medical treatments, when stuck in traffic, or when I'm feeling anxious about someone or something.

Mantra Meditation

Select a syllable, word, or group of words that you enjoy saying: this is your mantra. Many people use the neutral sound *om*. Say your mantra over and over again to yourself or out loud, whichever feels better to you. Let your mantra find its own rhythm as you repeat it. Try to stay aware of the mantra with each repetition. Notice any sensations in your body. If your mind wanders, acknowledge this, then bring your attention back to your mantra.

How I felt before trying mantra meditation:

How I felt after trying mantra meditation:

Practice the mantra meditation twice a day for two weeks; then think about whether it has affected your mood or state of mind.

How I felt after practicing the mantra meditation twice a day for two weeks:

Breath-Counting Meditation

Take several deep breaths, focusing your attention on each part of the process (inhale, the point at which you stop inhaling and begin exhaling, exhaling, and before breathing again). Pay attention to the pause and use that time to notice any sensations in your body. Now count your breaths, counting one for the inhale and two for the exhale. If you lose count, simply start over again. Note any thoughts that intrude, but just let them float away. Always bring your focus back to your breathing.

How I felt before trying the breath-counting meditation:

How I felt after doing the breath-counting meditation:

Practice the breath-counting meditation twice a day for two weeks; then think about whether you feel any different as a result.

How I felt after doing the breath-counting meditation once or twice a day for two weeks:

Gazing

Set the object of your choice on a surface that is at eye level and about a foot or two away from you. Choose something simple: a flower, a candle, a stone—something without a lot of emotional associations for you. Now gaze at the object while keeping your eyes relaxed. Notice everything about it: texture, size, color, shape. Trace the edge of the object with your eyes; see all the minute details that you wouldn't usually take the time to notice. If you become distracted, simply return your gaze to the object.

How I felt before trying the gazing meditation:

How I felt after trying the gazing meditation:

Practice the gazing meditation twice a day every day for two weeks; then think about whether it has affected your mood or state of mind.

How I felt after practicing the gazing meditation for two weeks:

Other Styles of Meditation

Below are ten additional meditations you can try. With each one, repeat the pattern of two weeks of practice, then make an assessment of how you feel. Testing in this way will allow you to find the styles of meditation that work best for you. All of these meditations can be used as a mix-and-match resource, depending on your mood. Almost any activity that doesn't consciously engage your brain can become a meditation. All you need to do is concentrate on every action and every sensation. You can meditate as you eat, walk, garden, wash the dishes, make a bed, dust the furniture, wash your car, and so on.

The Moving Band Meditation

Imagine that a three-inch-wide band is around the top of your head. Focus all your attention on that part of your head. Notice the sensations. If there is any tension, try to release it. Now mentally lower the band three inches and again focus your attention on the area encompassed by the band. What does it feel like? Again, try to relax any tension in this area. Continue to "move" the band slowly down your body in this way. Have it circle each leg or arm individually. Sometimes you may want to move this imaginary band very slowly. At other times it will feel more relaxing to move it more quickly.

The Inner Exploration

Pick one part of your body on which to focus all your attention. Explore that part of your body in detail with your mind. What are the sensations in this part of your body? How does it move? What does it do? Is it tense? If it is tense, practice relaxing this part of your body in isolation. You may want to choose parts of your body that tend to be tense, such as the neck, shoulders, jaw, forehead, or lower back. Or you may choose internal areas that tend to be tense, such as the stomach or chest. Another idea is to focus on body parts that you rarely think about, such as your toes, your elbows, or behind your knees.

Softening

We all tend to respond to pain, irritation, and discomfort by tensing all or part of our body, even though this automatic reaction tends to increase the pain or level of discomfort. The more it hurts, the more we respond with tension. This is a good meditation to do when you're tense or in pain. Get relaxed, then focus on the feeling of pain, irritation, or discomfort. Reassure yourself that everything is all right. Now consciously focus on relaxing (softening) the muscles you had been tensing.

Don't Move

Make an agreement with yourself that you will not move for a predetermined period of time—this can range from one to ten minutes. As you meditate, you will notice that some part of your body is moving without your realizing it. Just notice this movement and keep meditating. As you proceed you will begin to anticipate your need to move. Is it in response to an itch? Sore muscles? Identify the uncomfortable sensation and, rather than move, consciously soften around the sensation. Soften any muscle groups that feel tense. Be sure that you are breathing deeply. When your time is up, allow your body to move to whatever position is comfortable. Focus on what that feels like. Is the relief immediate or gradual? Release any tension in your body before resuming your activities.

Lifted Arm

Place your left hand on your lap, bend your right arm at the elbow (as in signaling for a right-hand turn), and lift that arm so the tips of your fingers are level with the top of your head. As the right arm begins to tire, focus your attention on the sensation of tiredness. See if you can find a way to relax the muscles in your arm without dropping it. Check out the rest of your body for tension. Relax any areas that feel tense. If you notice that you are beginning to feel anxious, take several deep breaths and remind yourself to relax. When you have finished meditating, lower your arm very slowly. Focus on what your arm feels like. How does the discomfort or tiredness change as you lower your arm? Relax any tension you feel in other part of your body before you resume your activities.

Warming Up and Cooling Down

Meditate in an area that is slightly warmer or cooler than you would normally prefer. As the extra warmth or coolness becomes noticeable, focus on your body's reaction to it. Is your body tensing? Are you starting to sweat or shiver? See if you can find a way to relax your body's reaction to the temperature. Does focusing on your object of meditation help? When you have finished meditating, spend a few minutes in an area that has a comfortable temperature and notice how your body adjusts to this change.

Responding to Irritation

Use any irritating sound or sensation as the focus of your meditation. It could be a barking dog, a printer, the noise of traffic, or an itch. Notice what your body does in reaction. Then relax any tension that your body has formed in response to the irritant. (This is a good meditation to use when you're in a place where it would normally be difficult to meditate because of noise or other distractions.)

Being Present in the Moment

Most of the stress in our lives comes from thinking about the past or worrying about the future. When all your attention is focused in the present moment, it is difficult to feel either stress or worry. Get relaxed, then focus all your attention on what you are doing right now. When other thoughts intrude, just turn your awareness back to the present moment

of meditation. It is not necessary to be alone in a special place to do this meditation. Try it when you are feeling irritated waiting in a line, stopped at a street light, stuck in traffic, or feeling overwhelmed or worried. Notice how focusing on the present moment makes you feel.

Eating Meditation

Sit down in front of your food. Take several deep breaths. Notice the color, shape, and texture of the food. Notice how looking at the food makes you feel. Reach slowly for your food. Now begin eating very slowly. Stay aware of how you are feeling and what you are tasting all the time you are eating. Eat as if you were eating in slow motion, being very conscious of each bit of food and each motion involved in eating it. How do your teeth and tongue feel? What does it feel like to swallow? Can you feel the food moving down your esophagus and into your stomach? When other thoughts intrude, notice them and return your attention to eating.

Walking Meditation

Stand up and relax your body all over. Take several deep, focused breaths. Now begin walking. Be aware of every process involved in moving. Try to match you breathing rhythm to your walking in a way that is comfortable to you. Pay attention to all the sensations of walking. Notice your muscles contracting and relaxing as you move. How do the various part of your body feel as you walk? After you've scanned the feelings in your body, become aware of everything you can see as you walk. Then become aware of everything you can hear and everything you can smell. As thoughts intrude, let them go and notice everything about the experience of walking instead.

Reactions of People in the Study

Nineteen people in the study have effectively used meditation. The benefits they noted are listed below. Which of these would you like to achieve?

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| <input type="checkbox"/> relaxation | <input type="checkbox"/> enhanced ability to sleep |
| <input type="checkbox"/> sense of control | <input type="checkbox"/> relief from depression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> lifting of symptoms | <input type="checkbox"/> feeling of safety |
| <input type="checkbox"/> grounding | <input type="checkbox"/> enhanced sense of life |
| <input type="checkbox"/> clearer thinking | <input type="checkbox"/> relief from manic episodes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ability to keep mania within bounds | <input type="checkbox"/> feeling free |
| <input type="checkbox"/> balance | <input type="checkbox"/> refreshment of the mind |
| <input type="checkbox"/> inner peace | <input type="checkbox"/> ability to deal with symptoms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> calmness | <input type="checkbox"/> diminished tension |

One of the great advantages of meditation is that it doesn't depend on the presence of anyone or anything; it's a therapeutic tool that is *always* available to you.

Other benefits you'd like to achieve from meditation:

Three Calming Exercises

Guided Imagery Meditation

Guided imagery focuses your imagination on relaxing and healing images. A detailed example is given below, but you can make up your own healing and peaceful scenarios. The important thing is to include as much sensory detail as possible. Try to include all five senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Try the following guided imagery meditation.

Get in a very comfortable sitting or lying position. Make sure that you are warm enough but not too warm, and that you will not be interrupted by the phone, doorbell, or the needs of others. You might want to make a tape recording of these instructions.

Stare at a spot above your head on the ceiling (if you're lying down) or stare straight ahead. Take a deep breath to a count of eight, hold it for a count of four, let it out for a count of eight.

Again—in to a count of eight; hold for a count of four; exhale for a count of eight. Again—in to a count of eight; hold for a count of four; exhale for a count of eight. Now close your eyes, but keep them in the same position they were in when you were staring at a spot on the ceiling or in front of you.

Breathe in to a count of eight; hold for a count of four; exhale for a count of eight. Now focus on your toes. Let them completely relax. Now move the feeling of relaxation slowly up your legs, through your heels and calves to your knees. Now let the warm feeling of relaxation move up your thighs. Feel your whole body relaxing. Let the relaxation move very slowly through your buttocks, lower abdomen, and lower back. Now feel it moving, very slowly, up your spine and through your abdomen. Now feel the warm relaxation flowing into your chest and upper back.

Let this relaxation flow from your shoulders, down your arms, through your elbows and wrists, out through your hands and fingers. Now let the relaxation go slowly through your throat and up your neck, letting it all soften and relax. Let the feeling move up into your face. Feel the relaxation fill your jaw and cheek muscles, and surround your eyes. Relax your eyes. Let the feeling of relaxation move up into your forehead. Now let your whole scalp relax and feel warm and comfortable. Your body is now completely relaxed, with the feeling of relaxation filling every muscle and cell of your body.

Picture yourself walking on the beach on a sunny day. As you stroll along, you feel the warmth of the sun on your back. You lie down on a soft towel in the sand. The sand molds to your body and you feel warm and comfortable. The sun warms your skin, the salt air smells fresh. You can still taste the fresh-squeezed juice you just drank, the juice that a friend made for you because she knows how much you like it. You hear the waves breaking against the shore in a steady rhythm. The sound of seagulls calling overhead completes your feeling of blissful contentment.

As you lie here you realize that you are perfectly and completely relaxed. You feel safe and at peace with the world. You know you have the power to relax yourself completely at any time you need to. By completely relaxing, you are giving the body the opportunity to stabilize itself, and that when you wake up you will feel calm, relaxed, and able to get on with your tasks for the day.

Now slowly wiggle your fingers and toes. Gradually open your eyes and resume your activities.

Focusing on Detail

For a quick relaxer when your day gets hectic, focus on detail. If you are at home, keep several picture postcards or greeting cards with lots of attractive detail handy. I recommend the book *Animalia* by Graeme Base. It is filled with detailed pictures which are very interesting to study. When you start to feel rushed or agitated, sit down in a quiet, comfortable spot, and focus on the detail in your chosen picture for ten minutes. Notice if you feel calmer afterwards.

You can do this exercise anywhere by just focusing on your surroundings. It can keep you from getting irritated when you're waiting in line or stuck in traffic. If you are waiting in a doctor's office, focus on the detail in a picture in a magazine.

Checking In

Every so often throughout the day, take a brief break, take several deep breaths, and get back in touch with how you feel. Check yourself out all over. And then imagine the tightness flowing out of the tense places in your body. Let your mind take a brief but complete break.

