



# meditation

in Life, Health & Happiness

# Meditation in Life, Health, and Happiness

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# Meditation: An Introduction

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## INTRODUCTION

Meditation is a mind-body practice and an age-old, integral part of many traditions, both religious and non-religious. Generally, a person who is meditating uses certain techniques, such as a specific posture, focused attention, and an open attitude toward distractions. Meditation may be practiced for many reasons, such as to increase calmness and physical relaxation, to improve psychological balance, to cope with illness, or to enhance overall wellness. This eBook provides a general introduction to meditation and suggests some resources for more information.

## KEY POINTS

- People practice meditation for a number of purposes.
- It is not fully known what changes occur in the body during meditation; whether they influence health; and, if so, how. Research is under way to find out more about meditation's effects, how it works, and conditions for which it may be most helpful.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

## OVERVIEW

The term meditation refers to a group of techniques, such as mantra meditation, relaxation response, mindfulness meditation, and Zen Buddhist meditation. Most meditative techniques started in Eastern religious or spiritual traditions. These techniques have been used by many different cultures throughout the world for thousands of years. Today, many people use meditation outside of its traditional religious or cultural settings, to improve mental focus, life balance and to improve the overall feeling of wellness.

In meditation, a person learns to focus attention. Some forms of meditation instruct the practitioner to become mindful of thoughts, feelings, and sensations and to observe them in a nonjudgmental way. This practice is believed to result in a state of greater calmness and physical relaxation, and psychological balance. Practicing meditation can change how a person relates to the flow of emotions and thoughts in the mind.

Most types of meditation have four elements in common:

- **A quiet location.** Meditation is usually practiced in a quiet place with as few distractions as possible. This can be particularly helpful for beginners.
- **A specific, comfortable posture.** Depending on the type being practiced, meditation can be done while sitting, lying down, standing, walking, or in other positions.



# More than 20 million Americans have used meditation

- **A focus of attention.** Focusing one's attention is usually a part of meditation. For example, the meditator may focus on a mantra (a specially chosen word or set of words), an object, or the sensations of the breath. Some forms of meditation involve paying attention to whatever is the dominant content of consciousness.
- **An open attitude.** Having an open attitude during meditation means letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them. When the attention goes to distracting or wandering thoughts, they are not suppressed; instead, the meditator gently brings attention back to the focus. In some types of meditation, the meditator learns to "observe" thoughts and emotions while meditating.

Meditation can be used as a component of mind-body medicine. Generally, mind-body medicine focuses on:

- The interactions among the brain/mind, the rest of the body, and behavior.
- The ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual, and behavioral factors can affect health.

## USES OF MEDITATION FOR HEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES

A 2007 national Government survey that asked about CAM (complementary and alternative medicine) use in a sample of 23,393 U.S. adults found that 9.4 percent of respondents (representing more than 20 million people) had used meditation in the past 12 months—compared with 7.6 percent of respondents (representing more than 15 million people) in a similar survey conducted in 2002. The 2007 survey also asked about CAM use in a sample of 9,417 children; 1 percent (representing 725,000 children) had used meditation in the past 12 months.

People use meditation to assist with various problems, such as:

- Feelings of Anxiety
- Physical Discomfort
- Feelings of Depression
- Stressful Feelings
- Difficulty sleeping

Meditation is also used to enhance and create a feeling of overall wellness.

## EXAMPLES OF MEDITATION PRACTICES

Mindfulness meditation and Transcendental Meditation (also known as TM) are two common forms of meditation. NCCAM-sponsored research projects are studying both of these types of meditation.

Mindfulness meditation is an essential component of Buddhism. In one common form of mindfulness meditation, the meditator is taught to bring attention to the sensation of the flow of the breath in and out of the body. The meditator learns to focus attention on what is being experienced, without reacting to or judging that experience. This is seen as helping the meditator learn to experience thoughts and emotions in normal daily life with greater balance and acceptance.

The TM technique is derived from Hindu traditions. It uses a mantra (a word, sound, or phrase repeated



practicing  
meditation  
may  
**work** by  
improving  
the mind's  
ability to  
**pay**  
**attention**

silently) to prevent distracting thoughts from entering the mind. The goal of TM is to achieve a state of relaxed awareness.

## HOW MEDITATION MIGHT WORK

Practicing meditation has been shown to induce some changes in the body. By learning more about what goes on in the body during meditation, researchers hope to be able to identify diseases or conditions for which meditation might be useful. Some types of meditation might work by affecting the autonomic (involuntary) nervous system. This system regulates many organs and muscles, controlling functions such as the heartbeat, sweating, breathing, and digestion. It has two major parts:

- The **sympathetic nervous system** helps mobilize the body for action. When a person is under stress, it produces the “fight-or-flight response”: the heart rate and breathing rate go up and blood vessels narrow (restricting the flow of blood).
- The **parasympathetic nervous system** causes the heart rate and breathing rate to slow down, the blood vessels to dilate (improving blood flow), and digestive juices to increase.

It is thought that some types of meditation might work by reducing activity in the sympathetic nervous system and increasing activity in the parasympathetic nervous system. In one area of research, scientists are using sophisticated tools to determine whether meditation is associated with significant changes in brain function. A number of researchers believe that these changes account for many of meditation's effects.

It is also possible that practicing meditation may work by improving the mind's ability to pay attention. Since attention is involved in performing everyday tasks and regulating mood, meditation might lead to other benefits. A 2007 NCCAM-funded review of the scientific literature found some evidence suggesting that meditation is associated with potentially beneficial health effects. However, the overall evidence was inconclusive. The reviewers concluded that future research needs to be more rigorous before firm conclusions can be drawn.

## IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT USING MEDITATION PRACTICES

- Do not use meditation as a replacement for conventional care or as a reason to postpone seeing a doctor about a medical problem.
- Ask about the training and experience of the meditation instructor you are considering. Look for published research studies on meditation for any health condition in which you are interested.
- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This should include diet, exercise, supplements and meditation practices that you engage in and use regularly. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about CAM, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign.

## NCCAM-SUPPORTED RESEARCH

Some recent NCCAM-supported studies have been investigating meditation for:

- Relieving stress in caregivers for elderly patients with dementia
- Reducing the frequency and intensity of hot flashes in menopausal women
- Relieving symptoms of chronic back pain
- Improving attention-related abilities (alerting, focusing, and prioritizing)
- Relieving asthma symptoms

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# Complementary and Alternative Medicine: What Is It?

RANGING FROM HERBS TO ACUPUNCTURE, ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY POPULAR. LEARN THE BASICS.

Start sneezing and before you know it, your friends are suggesting you try this or that herb or homeopathic remedy. You wonder if you should follow their advice. You've heard about complementary and alternative medicine (called CAM for short), but you don't know that much about it. Before you decide, get the facts. And make sure to talk with your doctor before you try something new—especially if you're pregnant or nursing, take medications, or have chronic health problems.

Because of the increasing popularity of complementary and alternative medicine—nearly 40 percent of U.S. adults report using it—doctors are learning more about these nonconventional approaches. When doctors use the term “alternative medicine,” they're referring to practices not typically used in conventional Western medicine. Exactly what's considered alternative medicine changes constantly as more treatments undergo study and move into the mainstream. When an alternative medicine therapy is used in addition to—not instead of—conventional therapy, it's called complementary. And when you use a complementary therapy in addition to a conventional one, it's called integrative medicine.

## *What are some examples of complementary and alternative medicine?*

To make sense of the many therapies available, it helps to look at how they are classified by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), the lead agency that funds for scientific research on CAM in the United States. The NCCAM categories are:

- Whole medical systems
- Mind-body medicine
- Biologically based practices
- Manipulative and body-based practices
- Energy medicine

Keep in mind, however, that the distinctions between therapies aren't always clear-cut, and some systems use techniques from more than one category.

## WHOLE MEDICAL SYSTEMS

A system isn't just a single practice or remedy—such as massage—but many practices that center on a philosophy, such as the power of nature or the presence of energy in your body. Examples of whole medical systems include:

# When you use a **complementary therapy** in addition to a conventional one, it's called **integrative medicine**.

**Ancient healing systems.** These healing systems arose long before conventional Western medicine and include ayurveda from India and traditional Chinese medicine.

- **Homeopathy.** This approach uses minute doses of a substance that causes symptoms to stimulate the body's self-healing response.
- **Naturopathy.** This approach focuses on noninvasive treatments to help your body do its own healing and uses a variety of practices, such as massage, acupuncture, herbal remedies, exercise and lifestyle counseling.

## MIND-BODY MEDICINE

Mind-body techniques strengthen the communication between your mind and your body. Complementary and alternative medicine practitioners say these two systems must be in harmony for you to stay healthy. Examples of mind-body connection techniques include meditation, prayer, and relaxation and art therapies.

## BIOLOGICALLY BASED PRACTICES

Examples include dietary supplements and herbal remedies. These treatments use ingredients found in nature. Examples of herbs include ginseng, ginkgo and echinacea, while examples of other dietary supplements include selenium, glucosamine sulfate and SAMe. Herbs and supplements can be taken as teas, oils, syrups, powders, tablets or capsules.

## MANIPULATION AND BODY-BASED PRACTICES

These methods use human touch to move or manipulate a specific part of your body. They include chiropractic and osteopathic manipulation and massage.

## ENERGY MEDICINE

Some complementary and alternative medicine practitioners believe an invisible energy force flows through your body, and when this energy flow is blocked or unbalanced you can become sick. Different traditions call this energy by different names, such as chi, prana and life force. The goal of these therapies is to unblock or re-balance your energy force. Energy therapies include qi gong, therapeutic touch, reiki and magnet therapy.

### *Why are some doctors hesitant about complementary and alternative medicine?*

Many conventional doctors practicing today did not receive training in CAM therapies, so they may not feel comfortable making recommendations or addressing questions in this area. However, as the evidence for certain therapies increases, doctors are increasingly open to complementary and alternative medicine. At the same time, conventional doctors also have good reason to be cautious when it comes to complementary and alternative medicine. Conventional medicine values therapies that have been demonstrated through research and testing to be safe and effective. While scientific evidence exists for some CAM therapies, for many there are key questions that are yet to be answered. In addition, some practitioners of complementary and alternative medicine make exaggerated claims about curing diseases, and some ask you to forgo treatment from your conventional doctor. For these reasons, many doctors are conservative about recommending CAM therapies.



## Why is there a lack of evidence about complementary and alternative treatments?

One reason for the lack of research in complementary and alternative treatments is that large, carefully controlled medical studies are costly. Trials for conventional medications or procedures are often directly or indirectly funded by the government or drug companies, giving conventional treatments more resources to do studies. CAM trials are more difficult to fund, so there are fewer trials. Nonetheless, a number of studies are under way on CAM treatments ranging from herbs to yoga. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine is the lead U.S. agency that supports research into complementary and alternative treatments, and it makes research findings available on its Website.

## TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT RISKS AND BENEFITS OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE TREATMENTS

Work with your conventional medical doctor to help you make informed decisions regarding complementary and alternative treatments. Even if your doctor can't recommend a specific complementary and alternative treatment, he or she can help you understand possible risks and benefits before you try a treatment. Though some of these treatments can be helpful, many have side effects and can cause problems with certain medications or health conditions. A final

piece of advice: Don't forget to tell your primary care doctor if you're using any alternative therapies. And don't stop or change your conventional treatment—such as your prescription medications—without talking to your doctor first.

## TALKING TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT MEDITATION AND CAM

Almost two-thirds of people aged 50 and older are using some form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM). According to a recent survey\* less than one-third of those people talk with their providers about CAM use.

*\*Survey by AARP and NCCAM*

### Tips for talking to your health care providers about CAM

- When completing patient history forms, be sure to include all therapies and treatments you use. Make a list in advance.
- Tell your health care providers about all therapies or treatments—including over-the-counter and prescription medicines, as well as herbal and dietary supplements.
- Don't wait for your providers to ask about your CAM use. Be proactive.
- If you are considering a new CAM therapy, ask your health care providers about its safety, effectiveness, and possible interactions with medications (both prescription and nonprescription).

## CAM Resources from the National Institutes of Health

### National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

[nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov)

Toll-free clearinghouse: 1-888-644-6226

### Medline Plus

[medlineplus.gov](http://medlineplus.gov)

### NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

[ods.od.nih.gov](http://ods.od.nih.gov)

### NCI Office of Cancer Complementary and Alternative Medicine

[cancer.gov/cam/](http://cancer.gov/cam/)

# Alternative Approaches To Mental Health Care

## *What are alternative approaches to mental health care?*

An alternative approach to mental health care is one that emphasizes the interrelationship between mind, body, and spirit. Although some alternative approaches have a long history, many remain controversial. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at the National Institutes of Health was created in 1992 to help evaluate alternative methods of treatment and to integrate those that are effective into mainstream health care practice. It is crucial, however, to consult with your health care providers about the approaches you are using to achieve mental wellness.

### SELF-HELP

Many people with mental illnesses find that self-help groups are an invaluable resource for recovery and for empowerment. Self-help generally refers to groups or meetings that:

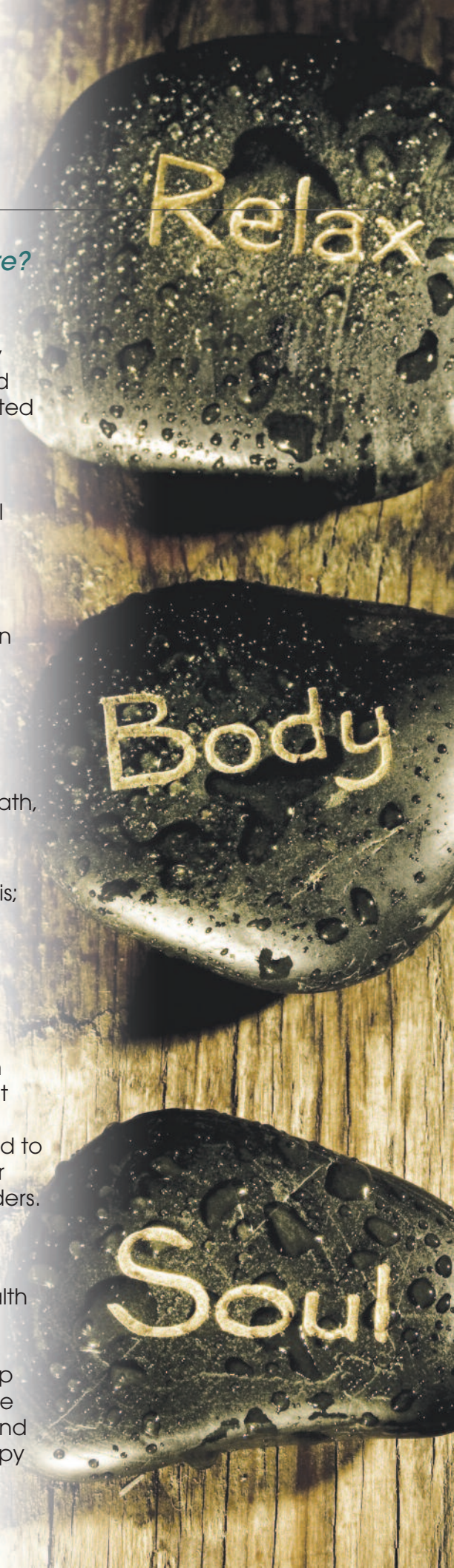
- Involve people who have similar needs;
- Are facilitated by a consumer, survivor, or other layperson;
- Assist people to deal with a “life-disrupting” event, such as a death, abuse, serious accident, addiction, or diagnosis of a physical, emotional, or mental disability, for oneself or a relative;
- Are operated on an informal, free-of-charge, and nonprofit basis;
- Provide support and education; and
- Are voluntary, anonymous, and confidential.

### PASTORAL COUNSELING

Some people prefer to seek help for mental health problems from their pastor, rabbi, or priest, rather than from therapists who are not affiliated with a religious community. Counselors working within traditional faith communities increasingly are recognizing the need to incorporate psychotherapy and/or medication, along with prayer and spirituality, to effectively help some people with mental disorders.

### ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPIES

Working with an animal (or animals) under the guidance of a health care professional may benefit some people with mental illness by facilitating positive changes, such as increased empathy and enhanced socialization skills. Animals can be used as part of group therapy programs to encourage communication and increase the ability to focus. Developing self-esteem and reducing loneliness and anxiety are just some potential benefits of individual-animal therapy (Delta Society, 2002).







## EXPRESSIVE THERAPIES

**Art Therapy:** Drawing, painting, and sculpting help many people to reconcile inner conflicts, release deeply repressed emotions, and foster self-awareness, as well as personal growth. Some mental health providers use art therapy as both a diagnostic tool and as a way to help treat disorders such as depression, abuse-related trauma, and schizophrenia. You may be able to find a therapist in your area who has received special training and certification in art therapy.

**Dance/Movement Therapy:** Some people find that their spirits soar when they let their feet fly. Others—particularly those who prefer more structure or who feel they have “two left feet”—gain the same sense of release and inner peace from the Eastern martial arts, such as Aikido and Tai Chi. The underlying premise to dance/movement therapy is that it can help a person integrate the emotional, physical, and cognitive facets of “self.”

**Music/Sound Therapy:** It is no coincidence that many people turn on soothing music to relax or snazzy tunes to help feel upbeat. Research suggests that music stimulates the body’s natural “feel good” chemicals (opiates and endorphins). This stimulation results in improved blood flow, blood pressure, pulse rate, breathing, and posture changes.

## CULTURALLY BASED HEALING ARTS

Traditional Oriental medicine (such as acupuncture, shiatsu, and reiki), Indian systems of health care (such as Ayurveda and yoga), and Native American healing practices (such as the Sweat Lodge and Talking Circles) all incorporate the beliefs that:

- Wellness is a state of balance between the spiritual, physical, and mental/emotional “selves.”
- An imbalance of forces within the body may cause illness.
- Herbal/natural remedies, combined with

sound nutrition, exercise, and meditation/prayer, can correct this imbalance.

**Acupuncture:** The Chinese practice of inserting needles into the body at specific points manipulates the body’s flow of energy to balance the endocrine system. This manipulation regulates functions such as heart rate, body temperature, and respiration, as well as sleep patterns and emotional changes. Acupuncture has been used in clinics to assist people with substance abuse disorders through detoxification; to relieve stress and anxiety; to treat attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder in children; to reduce symptoms of depression; and to help people with physical ailments.

**Ayurveda:** Ayurvedic medicine is described as “knowledge of how to live.” It incorporates an individualized regimen—such as diet, meditation, herbal preparations, or other techniques—to treat a variety of conditions, including depression, to facilitate lifestyle changes, and to teach people how to release stress and tension through yoga or transcendental meditation.

**Yoga/meditation:** Practitioners of this ancient Indian system use breathing exercises, posture, stretches, and meditation to balance the body’s energy centers. Yoga can be used in combination with other treatments for feelings of depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders.

### Native American traditional practices:

Ceremonial dances, chants, and cleansing rituals are part of Indian Health Service programs to heal depression, stress, trauma (including those related to physical and sexual abuse), and substance abuse.

**Cuentos:** Based on folktales, this form of therapy originated in Puerto Rico. The stories used contain healing themes and models of behavior such as self-transformation and endurance through adversity. Cuentos is used primarily to help Hispanic children recover from depression and other mental health problems related to leaving one’s homeland and living in a foreign culture.



## RELAXATION AND STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

**Biofeedback:** Learning to control muscle tension and “involuntary” body functioning, such as heart rate and skin temperature, can be a path to mastering one’s fears. It is used in combination with, or as an alternative to, medication to treat disorders such as anxiety, panic, and phobias. For example, a person can learn to “retrain” his or her breathing habits in stressful situations to induce relaxation and decrease hyperventilation.

**Guided Imagery or Visualization:** This process involves going into a state of deep relaxation and creating a mental image of recovery and wellness. Physicians, nurses, and mental health providers occasionally use this approach to treat alcohol and drug addictions, depression, panic disorders, phobias, and stress.

**Massage therapy:** The underlying principle of this approach is that rubbing, kneading, brushing, and tapping a person’s muscles can help release tension and pent emotions. It has been used to treat trauma-related depression and stress. A highly unregulated industry, certification for massage therapy varies widely from State to State. Some States have strict guidelines, while others have none.

## TECHNOLOGY-BASED APPLICATIONS

The boom in electronic tools at home and in the office makes access to mental health information just a telephone call or a “mouse click” away. Technology is also making treatment more widely available in once-isolated areas.

**Telemedicine:** Plugging into video and computer technology is a relatively new innovation in health care. It allows both consumers and providers in remote or rural areas to gain access to mental health or specialty expertise. Telemedicine can enable consulting providers to speak to and observe patients directly. It also can be used in education and training programs for generalist clinicians.

**Telephone counseling:** Active listening skills are a hallmark of telephone counselors. These also provide information and referral to interested callers. For many people telephone counseling often is a first step to receiving in-depth mental health care. Research shows that such counseling from specially trained mental health

providers reaches many people who otherwise might not get the help they need. Before calling, be sure to check the telephone number for service fees; a 900 area code means you will be billed for the call, an 800 or 888 area code means the call is toll-free.

**Electronic communications:** Technologies such as the Internet, bulletin boards, and electronic mail lists provide access directly to consumers and the public on a wide range of information. On-line consumer groups can exchange information, experiences, and views on mental health, treatment systems, alternative medicine, and other related topics.

**Radio psychiatry:** Another relative newcomer to therapy, radio psychiatry was first introduced in the United States in 1976. Radio psychiatrists and psychologists provide advice, information, and referrals in response to a variety of mental health questions from callers. The American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association have issued ethical guidelines for the role of psychiatrists and psychologists on radio shows.

### MORE INFORMATION

**American Chiropractic Association**  
1701 Clarendon Boulevard  
Arlington, VA 22209

**American Dance Therapy Association**  
2000 Century Plaza, Suite 108  
10632 Little Patuxent Parkway  
Columbia, MD 21044

**American Music Therapy Association**  
8455 Colesville Rd, Suite 1000  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

**American Association of Oriental Medicine**  
5530 Wisconsin Avenue, Suite 1210  
Chevy Chase, MD 20815

**The Delta Society**  
580 Naches Avenue SW, Suite 101  
Renton, WA 98055-2297

**National Empowerment Center**  
599 Canal Street  
Lawrence, MA 01840

**National Mental Health Consumers’ Self-Help Clearinghouse**  
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

# Relaxation Techniques: Learn Ways To Reduce Your Stress

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RELAXATION TECHNIQUES CAN REDUCE FEELINGS OF STRESS AND HELP YOU ENJOY A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE. EXPLORE RELAXATION TECHNIQUES YOU CAN DO ON YOUR OWN.

Relaxation techniques are an essential part of your quest for stress management. Relaxation isn't just about peace of mind or enjoying a hobby. Relaxation is a process that decreases the wear and tear on your mind and body from the challenges and hassles of daily life. Whether stress is spiraling out of control or you've already got it tamed, you can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Learning basic relaxation techniques is easy, often free or low cost, and poses little risk. Explore these simple relaxation techniques to get you started on balancing and improving your life.

## THE BENEFITS OF RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

With so many things to do, relaxation techniques may take a back seat in your life. But that means you might miss out on the benefits of relaxation. Practicing relaxation techniques can reduce stressful feelings by:

- Slowing your heart rate
- Slowing your breathing rate
- Increasing blood flow to major muscles
- Reducing muscle tension
- Improving concentration
- Reducing anger and frustration
- Boosting confidence to handle problems

## TYPES OF RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

Health professionals such as complementary and alternative medicine practitioners, doctors and psychotherapists can teach various relaxation techniques. But if you prefer, you also can learn some relaxation techniques on your own. In general, relaxation techniques involve refocusing your attention to something calming and increasing awareness of your body. It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you try to practice relaxation regularly to reap the benefits.

There are several main types of relaxation techniques, including:

**Autogenic relaxation.** Autogenic means something that comes from within you. In this relaxation technique, you use both visual imagery and body awareness to reduce stress. You repeat words or suggestions in your mind to help you relax and reduce muscle tension. You may imagine a peaceful place and then focus on controlled, relaxing breathing, slowing your heart rate, or feeling different physical sensations, such as relaxing each arm or leg one by one.

# your ability to relax improves with practice

**Progressive muscle relaxation.** In this relaxation technique, you focus on slowly tensing and then relaxing each muscle group. This helps you focus on the difference between muscle tension and relaxation. You become more aware of physical sensations. One method is to start by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your toes and progressively working your way up to your neck and head. Tense your muscles for at least five seconds and then relax for 30 seconds, and repeat.

**Visualization.** In this relaxation technique, you form mental images to take a visual journey to a peaceful, calming place or situation. During visualization, try to use as many senses as you can, including smell, sight, sound and touch. If you imagine relaxing at the ocean, for instance, think about such things as the smell of salt water, the sound of crashing waves and the warmth of the sun on your body. You may want to close your eyes, sit in a quiet spot and loosen any tight clothing.

Other common relaxation techniques include:

- Yoga
- Tai chi
- Listening to music
- Exercise
- Meditation
- Hypnosis
- Massage

## RELAXATION TECHNIQUES TAKE PRACTICE

As you learn relaxation techniques, you'll become more aware of muscle tension and other physical sensations of stress. Once you know what the stress response feels like, you can make a conscious effort to practice a relaxation technique the moment you start to feel stress symptoms. This can prevent stress from spiraling out of control.

Remember that relaxation techniques are skills. And as with any skill, your ability to relax improves with practice. Be patient with yourself—don't let your effort to practice relaxation techniques become yet another stressor.

Also, bear in mind that some people, especially those with serious psychological issues and a history of abuse, may experience feelings of emotional discomfort during some relaxation techniques. Although this is rare, if you experience emotional discomfort during relaxation techniques, stop what you're doing and consider talking to your health care professional or mental health provider.

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# Breathing and Relaxation

Relaxation is the absence of tension in muscle groups and a minimum or absence of “inner chatter” - the thoughts and worries that constantly go on in our minds. A person’s relaxation level is often dependent on his or her breathing pattern. Therefore, people with chronic lung conditions may feel less relaxed due to any related breathing difficulties.

Learn some ways to control breathing and some techniques to help you reach a greater level of relaxation during your day:

## DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING

The diaphragm is a major muscle used in breathing and is located beneath the lowest two ribs. At rest, the diaphragm muscle is bell shaped. During inspiration, it lowers and flattens out. Optimizing the use of the diaphragm is beneficial because it pulls air into the lower lobes of the lungs where more gas exchange takes place. Not only is the diaphragm the most efficient of all respiratory muscles, but using it tends to be very relaxing and calming. Along with our diaphragm, we use intercostal and abdominal muscles in the work of breathing. The intercostals (muscles between the ribs) pull to lift the rib cage up and out. This causes the lungs to open in all directions and air can be pulled down the airways. To exhale, the muscles that have been pulling relax and air is forced out. The diaphragm tenses, pulling air in; and relaxes, letting the spring of the ribs push the air out again.

## INSTANT RELAXATION DRILL

- Position yourself comfortably either sitting, standing, or lying down.
- Keep your back straight.
- Draw in a deep breath and count to five slowly. Exhale slowly and let all your muscles relax. Repeat this step two or three times until you are completely relaxed.
- Imagine a pleasant thought, such as “I am learning how to relax,” or a pleasant scene, such as a calm lake. If you use a natural scene, imagine all the sights, sounds, and smells of that scene as vividly as you can.

Practice this instant relaxation drill during your daily routine when you feel unwanted tension: for example, when you feel yourself becoming impatient while waiting in line.

## MEDITATION

### A Short Meditation (5-10 minutes)

- First, scan your body. See what your muscles feel like. Attempt to relax and loosen up. Allow yourself to feel body sensations. Stay with this body scanning for a couple of minutes. Allow the muscles to feel as heavy and warm as possible. Focus on warmth in your arms and hands.



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- Focus now on your thoughts. What are you thinking of? What kinds of thoughts have you had today, and which ones come to mind now? Are these upsetting thoughts or comforting ones? Dwell on the comforting or pleasant thoughts.
- Focus now on your emotions or feelings. What do you feel? Content? Angry? Annoyed? Sad? Excited? Peaceful? Allow yourself to feel.
- Take 3 deep breaths (easy and slow) and return to your activities.

### *Meditation Phrases*

#### On the Inhaling Breath

I close my eyes  
I deepen my breathing  
I allow my body to be still  
I focus into my center

#### On the Exhaling Breath

I bring my awareness inside  
I quiet my thoughts  
I relax my muscles  
I release my tensions (frustration, anxiety, fear, expectations)

### PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION

Whether you're performing an athletic feat or merely doing your job, the quality of your efforts depends in part on your ability to relax. There are a variety of relaxation techniques to choose from. Progressive relaxation yields a variety of benefits, including the development of a feeling of well-being, lowered blood pressure, decreased muscle tension, thereby reducing the body's need for oxygen and reducing fatigue and anxious feelings. To profit fully from progressive relaxation, you will want to create a habit of the process, which means you have to set aside time 3-5 times a week for relaxing. The nice thing about establishing a routine of relaxation is that it only requires 20 minutes and it can be done almost anywhere. There are two basic parts to progressive relaxation: 1) the recognition of tension in muscles, and 2) the relaxation of each muscle group.

#### **Muscle Tension Recognition**

The process for muscle tension recognition begins by assuming a comfortable position of lying down, sitting, or leaning back. You should be in a quiet area, away from distractions. Check for tension in each muscle group in your body: major tension areas include the shoulders, jaw and forehead. Since there is tension in every muscle group, progression in a logical order is required to recognize and alleviate tension.

#### **Relaxation Process**

As you focus on a muscle group, begin the relaxation process by tensing the muscle group; hold that tension for five seconds. Then relax your muscles slowly for 20-30 seconds so that the tension feels like it's draining from your body. As you perform the process, tell yourself to "feel the tension go", and "Let all the tension drain slowly from the muscle." Tension of a muscle group followed by a relaxation of those muscles can be repeated several times before moving on to the next muscle group. Throughout the full exercise, breathe at a steady rate.

### *Follow this progression:*

1. **Chest** - Take a deep breath. Beginning with the abdominal area, fill the lungs with air while feeling the tension in the chest area from the expanded lungs. Expire from the top of your lungs to your abdomen while relaxing.
2. **Right foot and lower leg** - Keeping the heel down, curl the toes back until tension can be felt in the ankle and calf muscle.
3. **Right upper leg** - Tense the top of the upper leg (quadriceps) and the bottom of the upper leg (hamstring).
4. **Left foot, lower leg and upper leg** - Repeat the process identified in numbers 2 and 3.
5. **Right hand and forearm** - With the palm down, lift the hand until tension can be felt in the top of the hand, the wrist and the forearm.
6. **Right upper arm** - Tense the bicep and tricep.
7. **Right shoulder** - Shrug the shoulder toward the ear and roll the head toward the shoulder so that shoulder and ear are touching.
8. **Left hand and forearm, upper arm and shoulder** - Repeat the process identified in numbers 5, 6 and 7.
9. **Jaw area** - Without damaging the teeth, bite down until tension can be felt in the jaw area.
10. **Mouth** - Purse the lips as if whistling.
11. **Chin** - Place the bottom of the tongue on the roof of the mouth and push upward.
12. **Forehead** - Wrinkle the brow.

As you begin the relaxation process, your body should feel heavy and warm. The feeling of heaviness will turn into a sensation of weightlessness as your body begins to relax. Typically, a cool band forms across the forehead as relaxation occurs. The feelings of weightlessness, warmness and a cool band across the forehead are all natural responses in the relaxation process. You will feel a sense of well-being if relaxation is achieved.

It takes several weeks to attain a full relaxation response, but you'll make progress daily as you acquire the skill of relaxing. There will be days where there are setbacks followed by days of great gains. Eventually, relaxation can be achieved in short period of time in any location.

## VISUALIZATION

Through visualization you can achieve a focused awareness while minimizing thoughts, emotions and physical pain. It will be useful to tape each exercise, and play it back while you are resting in a comfortable position.

### **Push your Tension away**

Close your eyes. Give your tension or pain a color and, a shape. Pause. Now change the shape and color of your tension and/or pain. Pause. Push this second shape and color away until it is out of your awareness.

### **Colors**

Close your eyes. Imagine your body filled with lights. For example, red lights for, tension or pain, and blue lights for relaxation. Pause. Imagine the lights changing from red to blue, or from blue to red, and be aware of any physical sensation you may experience while this is taking place. Pause. Change all of the lights in your body to blue and experience the overall relaxation.



# create a **habit** of the process, set aside **3-5 times** a week for relaxing

## **Mountain Path**

Close your eyes... Imagine yourself leaving the area where you live... Leave the daily hassles and the fast pace behind... Imagine yourself going across a valley and moving closer and closer to a mountain range... Imagine yourself in a mountain range... You are going up a winding road... Find a place on the winding road to stop... Find a path to walk up... Start walking up the path... Find a comfortable place to stop on the path... At this place, take some time to examine all the tension and stress in your life... Give the tension and stress shapes and colors... Look at them very carefully and after you have done this, put them down on the side of the path... Continue walking up the path until you come to the top of a hill. Look out over the hill... What do you see? Find an inviting, comfortable place and go there... Be aware of your surroundings... What is your 'special' place like?... Be aware of the sights, smells and sounds. Be aware of how you are feeling... Get settled and gradually start to relax. You are now feeling totally relaxed... Experience being relaxed totally and completely... Look around at your special place once. more... Remember this is your special place to relax, and you can come here anytime you want to. Come back to the room and tell yourself that this imagery is something you have created, and you can use it whenever you want to feel relaxed.

# Finding Balance Between Levels of Stress in Life

Today scientists are looking at how stress can affect our bodies, and what can be done to help reduce the impact of negative stress on our lives.

"This new science is forcing the medical community to take more seriously the popular notions of the mind-body connection," says Esther M. Sternberg, M.D., director of the Integrative Neural Immune Program at the National Institute of Mental Health. In response to stressful events, our bodies pump out hormones. These hormones aren't necessarily harmful and can be very useful, says Dr. Sternberg, author of *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions*. "The problem is when the stress response goes on for too long," she says. "That's when you get sick. Hormones weaken the immune system's ability to fight disease."

## DANGERS OF CHRONIC STRESS

Unhealthy levels of stress come in many guises. You may have to take care of a chronically ill person—and that's stressful. Or you may be stressed from being in constant pain. Work related issues, marriage or family problems, and financial difficulties can generate chronic stress. Severe, chronic stress can damage our bodies in many ways.

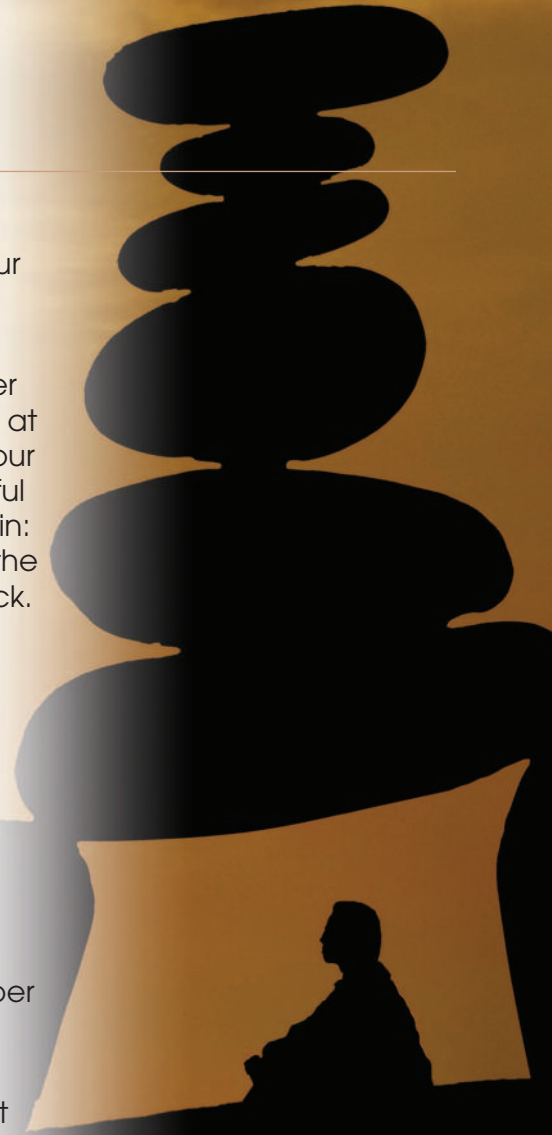
"Chronic stress has been shown to prolong wound healing, decrease response to vaccines, and increase the frequency and severity of upper respiratory infections," Dr. Sternberg says.

Stress also can aggravate existing health problems. It can worsen angina, disturb heart rhythm, raise blood pressure, and lead to stroke. It can spark asthma and may affect the digestive system, making ulcers, acid reflux, or irritable bowel problems worse. Stress can play havoc with your nerves and muscles, causing backaches, tension headaches, or migraines.

## HEALTHY STRESS LEVELS

People can develop healthier outlooks as well as improve performance by learning to identify and manage individual reactions to stress. The body has a standard reaction when it faces a task where performance really matters to goals or well-being: The sympathetic nervous system and the hypothalamus, pituitary and adrenal glands pump stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, into the bloodstream. Heartbeat and breathing speed up, and muscles tense.

What happens next is what divides healthy stress from harmful stress. People experiencing beneficial or "adaptive" stress feel pumped. The blood vessels dilate, increasing blood flow to help the brain, muscles and limbs meet a challenge, similar to the effects of aerobic exercise, according to research by Wendy Mendes, an associate professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco, and others.



# improve performance by learning to identify and manage individual reactions to stress



Once the need for this enhanced performance passes though, the parasympathetic nervous system needs to re-engage. This drives many of the body's daily functions such as sleep and digestion. The body needs to recover from the earlier state, and restore itself. Continued exposure to high levels of stressful feelings and situations can reduce the body's ability to balance these two states.

Awareness of yourself and your life situations is a key to managing these life factors. Recognizing events, people or situations, and knowing how to recharge afterwards can help. Keeping a positive outlook can also impact your ability to keep perspective, and respond to events.

## TAKE YOURSELF "OFFLINE"

"If you feel stressed all the time, you might need to take yourself 'offline,'" Dr. Sternberg urges. "We reboot our computers when they are overworked, but we don't seem to do it with our bodies."

"If you're exhausted from constantly working on deadline or caregiving, take a vacation—they're not luxuries, they're physical necessities. Find a place of peace where you can stop, look, and listen." If vacations are out of the question, Dr. Sternberg suggests meditation to rest body and mind. "Evidence shows that meditation bolsters immune function by reducing stress hormones that dampen immune cells' ability to fight infection," she says.

Exercise is a great way to improve your mood, and it changes the body's stress response, she says. If starting an exercise program seems too hard, then go slowly, she advises. "A few minutes are better than no minutes—you can gradually increase how much you exercise every day. You don't need to go jogging—walking has significant health benefits." Yoga helps many people relax, while others find peace of mind through prayer, music, reading, or art. "We need to find our place of peace and try to go there every day," she says. Getting enough sleep is very important for protection, Dr. Sternberg emphasizes. "Lack of sleep can change moods, cause irritability, weight gain, inability to perform, and poor memory."