

Relaxation Techniques

When we face difficulties and stress in our life, changes take place in our body and mind. For example when we experience sad or frightening events many of us are unable to sleep or eat properly. Often, we experience a sense of foreboding and tension or rapid beating of our hearts. These physical and psychological changes help us to function well in emergencies. As such, these changes (fear, tension, being keyed up) help us.

However, if these changes are severe or continue even long after stressful events, then they become harmful. When these changes exceed a certain limit, they begin to interfere with our ability to function adequately. For example, our inability to move or speak properly in a sudden stress is due to these changes going over the limit. Therefore these changes become harmful and adversely affect our coping capacity.

In the same way, if these changes continue long after the stressful events, they will affect our daily life and ability to maintain an equilibrium when faced with problems. Sometimes it can lead to psychosomatic diseases.

We will consider relaxation techniques here. There are four methods that have been shown by scientific research to produce relaxation and help in certain psychological conditions like anxiety and psychosomatic diseases.

1. Breathing exercises
2. Progressive Muscular Relaxation
3. Regular Repetition of Words
4. Meditation

When following these methods it is helpful to observe a few preliminary conditions:

- a. Place - a quiet, well ventilated place, free of disturbances.
- b. Time - morning and evening, twice a day for ten minutes before taking meals.
- c. Clothing - loose, cotton clothes are best.

It is important to do each exercise in a peaceful, relaxed state. A feeling of urgency to do something difficult or attempt to try and finish it quickly, like running a race, should be avoided at all cost. Once one has become familiar with the method, it can be done in other places and times when the need arises. For example, when faced with a stressful situation or in a frightening environment, or even during a leisure period, one can do the breathing exercises and/or the repetition of words and gain mental tranquillity. By regular practice it is possible to create a healthy, peaceful life.

1. Breathing Exercises (Pranayama, *Ana pana Sati* or *Mindful Breathing*)

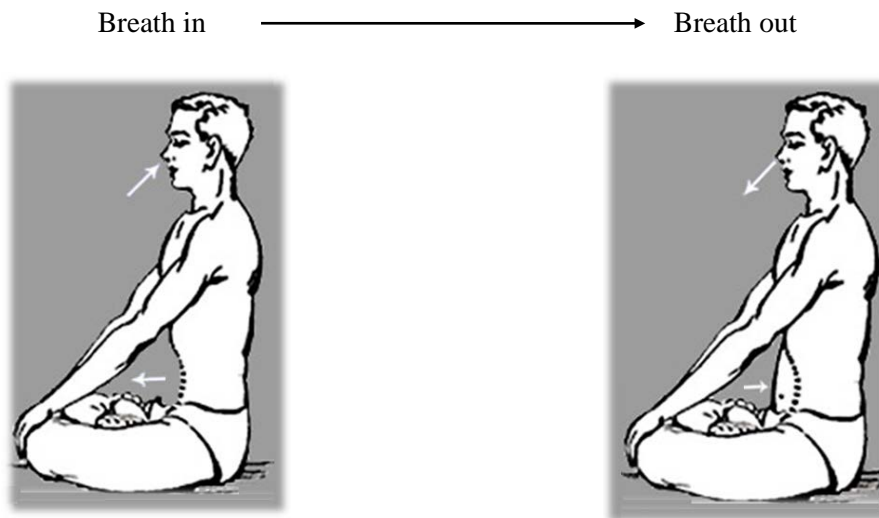
When we are disturbed mentally, our breathing becomes shallow and irregular. This in turn will cause changes in our physical body and mental state. By learning to make our breathing deep and regular, we can oppose the above physical and psychological changes and thereby produce a state of mental and bodily peace.

For this exercise, it is necessary to choose a posture that is not too rigid. Assume any posture that is comfortable (eg. sitting in a chair or ground, lying on a bed; or assume the lotus or siddhasanam) and in a relaxed, tranquil state observe yourself breathing in and breathing out for a few minutes.

Often, we will notice that predominantly our chest is being used for breathing. But for this exercise we have to learn to mainly use our abdomen for breathing. We can observe that the breath goes in when our chest and abdomen expand. We should now learn to breath slowly, continuously and deeply. We can do this easily if we concentrate on our abdomen slowly expanding (one can place the palm of one's hand on abdomen for this) while we draw in our breath deeply. Then, by allowing our chest and abdomen to relax the breath will go out automatically. Try to do this slowly and continuously. There should be no noise while breathing. In this way, observe the breath going in and out several times. Slowly and gradually learn to shift your breathing to the abdomen so that most of the breathing is done by the movement of the abdomen muscles.

After this, slowly count up to three in your mind while breathing in, and again count up to three while breathing out. Over several weeks, slowly increase the count depending on your capacity. Alternatively, you can say a meaningful word or mantra such as "OM" to yourself. "Ooo" as you breath in and "Mmm" as you breath out. Slowly increase the time taken to say O and M. Breathing, should never be difficult or labored, but it must always be done in a comfortable way.

In the Pranayama method, breath in for a fixed cot, then hold your breath for a fixed count, and then let your breath out for a fixed count (ration 1:4:2 respectively or its multiples). In Anapana Sati, observe the respiration as the breath flows in and flows out, feel the air touch the nose and upper lip or the abdomen moving up and down. One should try to concentrate his mind well on the breathing alone.



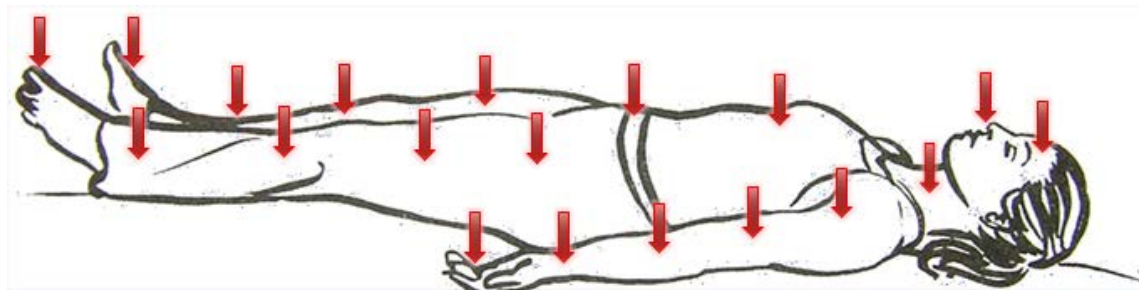
Breath in slowly by expanding your chest and abdomen muscles

Let your breath out naturally by relaxing your chest & abdomen muscles

2. Progressive Muscular Relaxation (Shanthi or Sava Asanam, Mindful Body Awareness)

When due to stress, the muscles are continuously in a state of contraction, physical and psychological symptoms will appear in the body (For example: tension headache, backache, neck pain, joint pains, weakness, and tiredness). Further, there may occur psychological fear, tension, tightness, being easily startled, overreactivity and irritability. Conversely, these mental states can produce chronic contraction or tension of muscles leading to the above physical symptoms. By practicing the following exercise, you can obtain release from these painful physical and psychological complaints by creating a state of relaxation, calmness and peace.

Lie down flat, facing up, on a mat or bed. Spread out your legs, and let your hands lie by your side. Close your eyes and observe your breathing in and out slowly, without hurry, and deeply as described above. You should relax your body and lie like a “Lifeless Corpse”



Picture 10

Slowly relax each part of your body and muscles while saying “**shanthi, shanthi, shanthi**”

Beginning from your toes, slowly relax each part of your body. First concentrate your mind on your toes and while relaxing (loosening or letting go) say to yourself “My toes are relaxed, “**shanthi, shanthi, shanthi**”. In this way, move up your body - toes, soles, ankle, calf, knee, thigh, anus, abdomen, back, chest, fingers, hands, elbow, arms, shoulders, neck, face and finally head. As you relax each part, say to yourself “My..... is relaxed, “**shanthi, shanthi, shanthi**”. A deep sense of tranquillity, calm and peace should be felt in that part. As you move up, the part already relaxed should not again become tense, but remain relaxed. At the end, the whole body should be deeply relaxed. If someone should lift your limb and let it fall, it should fall like a lifeless log. Experience this peace for a few moments. Do not get up suddenly, but slowly move your body a little and become aware of the body before getting up.

In the western scientific method called Jacobson’s progressive muscular relaxation each group of muscles are strongly contracted before relaxing, so that you can appreciate the difference between the tensed and relaxed state.

Progressive muscular relaxation is a good way of falling asleep. For those with sleeping difficulties just do this exercise after lying down to sleep.

3. Repetition of Words (Mantra, Jappa, Prayer Beads, T.M.)

In this method, repetition of a word or phrase will create a state of mental peace. The mantra that has been taught to you by your Guru, the Jesus prayer (*Jesus Christ have mercy on me*), a holy verse, Bhuddist (eg *Buddhang Saranang Gachchami*), Islamic (*Subhanallah*), God’s name, meaningful word or saying, or simply, the basic Pranava mantra “*OM*” can be used. First, repeat your chosen word to yourself again and again (as many times as you can eg. 100 times or 108 or its multiples) twice a day. After some time, this repetition will come easily, sometimes happening without effort or your awareness. Next, after a month of above practice, repeat your chosen word without making a sound, moving only your tongue and muscles of speech. Do this for a few months. Then, repeat your chosen word without moving any of you muscles. After doing this for few months, just think of your word in your mind.



4. Meditation (Contemplation, Vipassana)

For meditation you can sit in a posture that is comfortable to you or assume Padmasanam or Sidhasanam. It is important to keep your back straight. It is helpful to meditate daily at the same time and place that is quiet and without disturbance. You will need to choose an object for meditation. Your deity, God, respected saint or elder, a beautiful natural scene or flame can be chosen as the subject of meditation. Alternatively, the above mentioned word or phrase can be used. Very simply, you can mindfully observe your breath (for example, the in flow and out flow of breathing at the tip of your nose or the rising or falling of the abdomen).

First assume the posture comfortable to you (where you can sit for a long period without feeling pain), then do the breathing exercise, relaxation and repetition of word as described above. To meditate, you will have to concentrate your mind and keep it continuously on the object chosen by you. If the mind becomes distracted or goes off onto another subject, slowly become aware of it and gradually, without force, bring it back to the object you have chosen. Very softly, without too much force or effort, you must learn to keep your mind on your chosen object. Slowly practice this for a few minutes, increasing the time as you go along. In time you will be able to meditate on an object for a continuous period.



Concentrate your mind & keep it on a fixed object.

Note: As the above exercises are similar to Yoga, Buddhist, Christian or Islamic practices, it is best to learn these methods from an experienced teacher like your Guru, monk, priest, Ven. Bhiku, Rev. Father, Sister or Uman.