

HOW TO BEAT DEPRESSION



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Symptoms

Depression can change or distort the way you see yourself, your life, and those around you.

People who have depression usually see everything with a more negative attitude, unable to imagine that any problem or situation can be solved in a positive way.

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Agitation, restlessness, and irritability
- Dramatic change in appetite, often with weight gain or loss
- Very difficult to concentrate
- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Feelings of worthlessness, self-hate, and guilt
- Becoming withdrawn or isolated
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyed
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Trouble sleeping or excessive sleeping

Depression can appear as anger and discouragement, rather than feelings of sadness.

If depression is very severe, there may also be [psychotic](#) symptoms, such as [hallucinations](#) and delusions.



HOW DEPRESSED ARE YOU?

	Frequently	Occasionally	Rarely
1 Do you feel downhearted, depressed or sad?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Do you feel worse in the morning?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Do you have crying spells, or feel like crying?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Do you have trouble falling asleep or sleeping through the night?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Is your appetite poor and are you losing weight without trying?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Are you gaining weight or bingeing on sweet foods?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Do you feel unattractive and unlovable?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8 Do you prefer to be alone and shy away from social interaction?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9 Do you feel fearful and easily panic about things?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10 Do you feel anxious and nervous?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11 Are you often tired?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 Do you easily become irritable and angry?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13 Are you restless and unable to keep still?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14 Do you feel hopeless about the future?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 Do you think you are letting people down, or have done in the past?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 Is your mood affecting your work?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 Is it an effort to do the things you used to do with ease because of a lack of enthusiasm?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18 Do you feel like you have slowed down?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19 Do you find it difficult to make decisions?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20 Do you worry about your health?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21 Do you feel less enjoyment from activities that once gave you pleasure?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22 Do you have less interest or desire for sex?.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Score 2 for each “frequently” answer, 1 for “occasionally,” and 0 for “rarely.	Total for each column.....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Add scores for all columns.....	<input style="width: 60px; height: 30px;" type="text"/>	

INTERPRETATION OF SCORES

Below 5

You are normal. You appear to be positive, optimistic and able to roll with the punches.

5-9

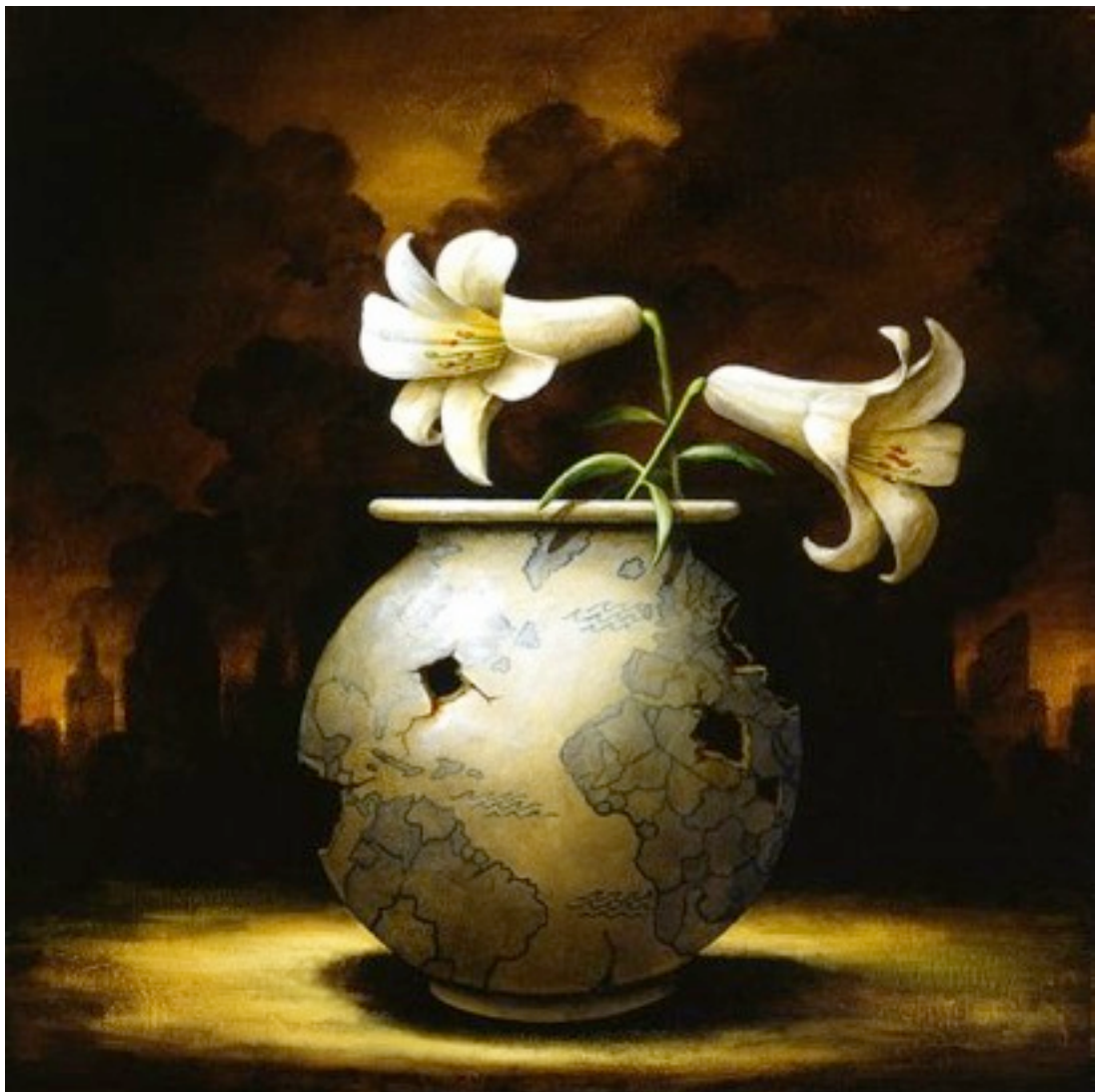
You have a mild case of the blues. You need to pay attention to the issues in your life, and consider a few life-style changes before things get worse.

10-15

You have a moderate case of the blues. You might benefit from professional help.

More than 15

You have plenty of symptoms of depression. You definitely need professional help, and soon.



Major depression

Depression - major; Unipolar depression; Major depressive disorder

[Depression](#) may be described as feeling sad, blue, unhappy, miserable, or down in the dumps. Most of us feel this way at one time or another for short periods.

True clinical depression is a mood disorder in which feelings of sadness, loss, anger, or frustration interfere with everyday life for weeks or longer.

Causes, incidence, and risk factors

The exact cause of depression is not known. Many researchers believe it is caused by chemical changes in the brain. This may be due to a problem with your genes, or triggered by certain stressful events. More likely, it's a combination of both.

Some types of depression run in families. But depression can also occur if you have no family history of the illness. Anyone can develop depression, even kids.

The following may play a role in depression:

- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Certain medical conditions, including underactive [thyroid](#), cancer, or long-term pain
- Certain medications such as steroids
- Sleeping problems
- Stressful life events, such as:
 - Breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend
 - Failing a class
 - Death or illness of someone close to you
 - Divorce
 - Childhood abuse or neglect
 - Job loss
 - Social isolation (common in the elderly)



Exploring your depression treatment options

Just as no two people are affected the exact same way by depression, there is no “one size fits all” treatment that cures depression. What works for one person might not work for another. The best way to treat depression is to become as informed as possible about the treatment options, and then tailor them to meet your needs.

Depression treatment tips:

- **Learn as much as you can about your depression.** It’s important to determine whether your depression symptoms are due to an underlying medical condition. If so, that condition will need to be treated first. The severity of your depression is also a factor. The more severe the depression, the more intensive the treatment you’re likely to need.
- **It takes time to find the right treatment.** It might take some trial and error to find the treatment and supports that works best for you. For example, it might take a few tries to find a therapist that you click with if you decide to pursue therapy. Or you may try an antidepressant, only to find that you don’t need it if you take a daily half hour walk. Be open to change and a little experimentation.
- **Don’t rely on medications alone.** Although medication can relieve the symptoms of depression, studies show that other treatments, including exercise and therapy, can be just as effective or even more so. What’s more, they don’t come with unwanted side effects. If you do decide to try medication, remember that medication works best when you pursue therapy as well.
- **Get social support.** The more you cultivate your social connections, the more protected you are from depression. If you are feeling stuck, don’t hesitate to talk to trusted family members or friends. Asking for help is not a weakness but a sign of strength.
- **Treatment takes time and commitment.** All of these depression treatments take time, and sometimes it might feel overwhelming or frustratingly slow. That is normal. Recovery has its ups and downs.



Treatment

In general, treatments for depression include:

- Medications called antidepressants
- Talk therapy, called psychotherapy

If you have mild depression, you may only need one of these treatments. People with more severe depression usually need combination of both treatments. It takes time to feel better, but there are usually day-to-day improvements.

If you are suicidal or extremely depressed and cannot function you may need to be treated in a psychiatric hospital.

MEDICATIONS FOR DEPRESSION

Drugs used to treat depression are called antidepressants. Common types of antidepressants include:

- Selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), including [fluoxetine](#) (Prozac), [sertraline](#) (Zoloft), [paroxetine](#) (Paxil), [fluvoxamine](#) (Luvox), [citalopram](#) (Celexa), and [escitalopram](#) (Lexapro).
- Serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), including [desvenlafaxine](#) (Pristiq), [venlafaxine](#) (Effexor), and [duloxetine](#) (Cymbalta).

Other medicines used to treat depression include:

- Tricyclic antidepressants
- [Bupropion](#) (Wellbutrin)
- Monoamine oxidase inhibitors

If you have delusions or hallucinations, your doctor may prescribe additional medications.

WARNING: Children, adolescents, and young adults should be watched more closely for suicidal behavior, especially during the first few months after starting medications.

If you do not feel better with antidepressants and talk therapy, you may have treatment-resistant depression. Your doctor will often prescribe higher (but still safe) doses of an antidepressant, or a combination of medications. [Lithium](#) and [thyroid](#) hormone supplements also may be added to help the antidepressants work better.

St. John's wort is an herb sold without a prescription. It may help some people with mild depression. However, it can change the way other medicines work in your body, including antidepressants and birth control pills. Talk to your doctor before trying this herb.

CHANGES IN MEDICATIONS

Sometimes, medications that you take for another health problem can cause or worsen depression. Talk to your doctor about all the medicines you take. Your doctor may recommend changing your dose or switching to an alternative drug. Never stop taking your medications without first talking to your doctor.

Women being treated for depression who are pregnant or thinking about becoming pregnant should not stop taking antidepressants without first talking to their doctors.

Depression medication may be the most advertised treatment for depression, but that doesn't mean it is the most effective. Depression is not just about a chemical imbalance in the brain. Medication may help relieve some of the symptoms of moderate and severe depression, but it doesn't cure the underlying problem, and it's usually not a long-term solution. Antidepressant medications also come with side effects and safety concerns, and withdrawal can be very difficult. If you're considering whether antidepressant medication is right for you, learning all the facts can help you make an informed and personal decision about how best to treat your depression.

If you are taking medication for depression, don't ignore other treatments. Lifestyle changes and therapy not only help speed recovery from depression, but provide skills to help prevent a recurrence.

Psychotherapy for depression treatment

Talk therapy is an extremely effective treatment for depression. Therapy gives you tools to treat depression from a variety of angles. What you learn in therapy gives you skills and insight to help prevent depression from coming back.

There are many types of therapy available. Three of the more common methods used in depression include cognitive behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, and psychodynamic therapy. Often, a blended approach is used.

Some types of therapy teach you practical techniques on how to reframe negative thinking and employ behavioral skills in combating depression. Therapy can also help you work through the root of your depression, helping you understand why you feel a certain way, what your triggers are for depression, and what you can do to stay healthy.

Therapy and “the big picture” in depression treatment

One of the hallmarks of depression is feeling overwhelmed and having trouble focusing. Therapy helps you step back and see what might be contributing to your depression and how you can make changes. Here are some of the “big picture” themes that therapy can help with:

- **Relationships.** Understanding the patterns of your relationships, building better relationships and improving current relationships will help reduce isolation and build social support, important in preventing depression.
- **Setting healthy boundaries.** If you are stressed and overwhelmed, and feel like you just can't say no, you are more at risk for depression. Setting healthy boundaries in relationships and at work can help relieve stress, and therapy can help you identify and validate what boundaries are right for you.
- **Handling life's problems.** Talking with a trusted therapist can provide good feedback on more positive ways to handle life's challenges and problems.



Therapy that works for depression, and therapy that doesn't

Well over one hundred thousand separate pieces of research have been carried out into what depression is and the most effective methods for treating it. Findings tell us that the most effective therapies for clinical depression are therapies that aim to teach skills rather than merely attempt to 'uncover' origins of and reasons for depression.

The most effective therapies are those that are 'solution-focussed' that is they seek to alleviate suffering and teach skills which can prevent future relapse.

According to the international guidelines for the treatment of clinical depression, therapy should be 'time limited' - that is to say if no improvements have occurred within six weeks of the start of the therapy the person should be referred on to another practitioner. The best combination for the treatment of depression is a combination of cognitive therapy, behavioral therapy and interpersonal therapy.

- Cognitive therapy looks at how we think and interpret events in our lives.
- Behavioral therapy looks at what we do.
- Interpersonal therapy looks at how we relate to others and how good our communication styles are.

So called psychoanalytical therapies or 'psycho-dynamic' approaches which attempt to 'go back' and discover reasons for things - focussing on what went wrong rather than building on resources are contraindicated for depression.

Depressed people often look back and mull over past hurts too much anyway, so common sense tells us that any therapy that extends this process is unlikely to be of lasting help. A depressed person may feel better in the short term when seeing a 'psycho-dynamic' therapist simply because of the support.

However, thousands of pieces of research show us that lasting symptom relief is unlikely to come from these 'pathology-focused' approaches.

Depressed people need hope, new skills and different ways of thinking to prevent future bouts of depression. It may be important to address issues from the past but the client has to become equipped and confident for living in the future.

This type of therapy has been said to cause 'Paralysis by Analysis', and will often worsen depression.

When seeking help for depression, you must be an enlightened consumer of therapy and counseling!

When the going gets tough in therapy...

Like house remodeling, taking apart things that haven't worked well in one's life often makes them seem worse before they get better. When therapy seems difficult or painful, don't give up. If you discuss your feelings and reactions honestly with your therapist, it will help you move forward rather than retreat back to your old, less effective ways. However, if the connection with your therapist consistently starts to feel forced or uncomfortable, don't be afraid to explore other options for therapy as well. A strong trusting relationship is the foundation of good therapy.

Lifestyle changes: An essential part of depression treatment

Lifestyle changes are simple but powerful tools in treating depression. Sometimes they might be all you need. Even if you need other treatment, lifestyle changes go a long way towards helping lift depression. And they can help keep depression at bay once you are feeling better.

Lifestyle changes that can treat depression

- **Exercise.** Regular exercise is a powerful depression fighter. Not only does it boost serotonin, endorphins, and other feel-good brain chemicals, it triggers the growth of new brain cells and connections, just like antidepressants do. Best of all, you don't have to train for a marathon in order to reap the benefits. Even a half-hour daily walk can make a big difference. For maximum results, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of activity on most days.
- **Nutrition.** Eating well is important for both your physical and mental health. Eating small, well-balanced meals throughout the day will help you keep your energy up and minimize mood swings. While you may be drawn to sugary foods for the quick boost they provide, complex carbohydrates are a better choice. They'll get you going without the all-too-soon sugar crash.
- **Sleep.** Sleep has a strong effect on mood. When you don't get enough sleep, your depression symptoms will be worse. Sleep deprivation exacerbates irritability, moodiness, sadness, and fatigue. Make sure you're getting enough sleep each night. Very few people do well on less than 7 hours a night. Aim for somewhere between 7 to 9 hours each night.
- **Social Support.** Strong social networks reduce isolation, a key risk factor for depression. Keep in regular contact with friends and family, or consider joining a class or group. Volunteering is a wonderful way to get social support and help others while also helping yourself.
- **Stress Reduction.** Make changes in your life to help manage and reduce stress. Too much stress exacerbates depression and puts you at risk for future depression.



Alternative and complementary treatments for depression

Vitamins and supplements for depression treatment

If you've considered alternative treatments such as herbal remedies, vitamins or supplements for your depression, you are not alone. Many people with depression have considered them, and they are widely available over the counter.

The jury is still out on how well these remedies work. While some vitamins and herbal supplements may be promising alternative treatments for depression, research is still ongoing. Their efficacy has not been scientifically proven. If your depression symptoms are in part due to some sort of nutritional deficiency, you may benefit from additional vitamin supplementation, but this should be on the advice of your healthcare professional.

If you decide to try natural and herbal supplements, remember that they can have side effects and drug or food interactions. For example, St. John's Wort—a promising herb used for treatment for mild to moderate depression—can interfere with prescription drugs such as blood thinners, birth control pills and prescription antidepressants. Make sure your doctor or therapist knows what you are taking.

Other alternative depression treatments

- **Relaxation techniques.** Although research is still ongoing, relaxation techniques may not only help relieve symptoms of depression, but also reduce stress and boost feelings of joy and well-being. Try yoga, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation.



Relaxation Techniques for Stress Relief

FINDING THE RELAXATION EXERCISES THAT WORK FOR YOU

For many of us with hectic, stressful lives, relaxation means zoning out in front of the TV at the end of the day or snatching some extra sleep at the weekend. Unfortunately, this does little to help reduce the damaging effects of stress on the mind and body.

To effectively combat stress, we need to activate the body's natural relaxation response. You can do this by practicing relaxation techniques including deep breathing, visualization, meditation, and yoga, or by performing rhythmic exercise, such as running, cycling, or mindful walking. Finding ways to fit these activities into your life can help reduce everyday stress and boost your energy and mood. They'll also help you to stay calm in the face of life's unexpected events.

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- [Breathing meditation](#)
- [Progressive muscle relaxation](#)
- [Body scan meditation](#)
- [Mindfulness meditation](#)
- [Visualization meditation](#)
- [Yoga and tai chi](#)
- [Make relaxation techniques fit your life](#)

The relaxation response: bringing your nervous system back into balance

Sometimes you may need a little stress for creativity, learning, and your very survival. Stress is only harmful when it becomes overwhelming and interrupts the healthy state of equilibrium that your nervous system needs to remain in balance. Unfortunately, overwhelming stress has become an increasingly common characteristic of contemporary life. When stressors throw your nervous system out of balance, relaxation techniques can bring it back into a balanced state by producing the *relaxation response*, a state of deep calmness that is the polar opposite of the stress response.

When stress overwhelms your nervous system your body is flooded with chemicals that prepare you for "fight or flight". While the stress response can be lifesaving in emergency situations where you need to act quickly, it wears your body down when constantly activated by the stresses of everyday life. The relaxation response puts the brakes on this heightened state of readiness and brings your body and mind back into a state of equilibrium.



Producing the relaxation response

Learn about obstacles to the relaxation response

Watch this 3-minute video: [Roadblocks to awareness](#)

A variety of different relaxation techniques can help you bring your nervous system back into balance by producing the relaxation response. The relaxation response is not lying on the couch or sleeping but a mentally active process that leaves the body relaxed, calm, and focused.

Learning the basics of these relaxation techniques isn't difficult, but it does take practice. Most stress experts recommend setting aside at least 10 to 20 minutes a day for your relaxation practice. If you'd like to get even more stress relief, aim for 30 minutes to an hour. If that sounds like a daunting commitment, remember that many of these techniques can be incorporated into your existing daily schedule—practiced at your desk over lunch or on the bus during your morning commute.

Finding the relaxation technique that's best for you

There is no single relaxation technique that is best for everyone. When choosing a relaxation technique, consider your specific needs, preferences, fitness level, and the way you tend to react to stress. The right relaxation technique is the one that resonates with you, fits your lifestyle, and is able to focus your mind and interrupt your everyday thoughts in order to elicit the relaxation response. In many cases, you may find that alternating or combining different techniques will keep you motivated and provide you with the best results.



How do you react to stress?

How you react to stress may influence the relaxation technique that works best for you:

Stress Response	Symptoms	Relaxation Technique
Overexcited	You tend to become angry, agitated, or keyed up under stress	You may respond best to relaxation techniques that quiet you down, such as meditation, deep breathing, or guided imagery
Under excited	You tend to become depressed, withdrawn, or spaced out under stress	You may respond best to relaxation techniques that are stimulating and that energize your nervous system, such as rhythmic exercise
Frozen (both overexcited and under excited at the same time – like pressing on the brakes and gas simultaneously)	You tend to freeze: speeding up in some ways while slowing down in others	Your challenge is to identify relaxation techniques that provide both safety and stimulation to help you “reboot” your system. Techniques such as mindfulness walking or power yoga might work well for you

Do you need alone time or social stimulation?

If you crave solitude, solo relaxation techniques such as meditation or progressive muscle relaxation will give you the space to quiet your mind and recharge your batteries. If you crave social interaction, a class setting will give you the stimulation and support you’re looking for. Practicing with others may also help you stay motivated.



Relaxation technique 1: Breathing meditation for stress relief

With its focus on full, cleansing breaths, deep breathing is a simple, yet powerful, relaxation technique. It's easy to learn, can be practiced almost anywhere, and provides a quick way to get your stress levels in check. Deep breathing is the cornerstone of many other relaxation practices, too, and can be combined with other relaxing elements such as aromatherapy and music. All you really need is a few minutes and a place to stretch out.

Practicing deep breathing meditation

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much fresh air as possible in your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- Breathe in through your nose. The hand on your stomach should rise. The hand on your chest should move very little.
- Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you exhale, but your other hand should move very little.
- Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale.

If you find it difficult breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor. Put a small book on your stomach, and try to breathe so that the book rises as you inhale and falls as you exhale.



Relaxation technique 2: Progressive muscle relaxation for stress relief

Progressive muscle relaxation involves a two-step process in which you systematically tense and relax different muscle groups in the body.

With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation gives you an intimate familiarity with what tension—as well as complete relaxation—feels like in different parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. And as your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of stress relief.

Practicing progressive muscle relaxation

Before practicing Progressive Muscle Relaxation, consult with your doctor if you have a history of muscle spasms, back problems, or other serious injuries that may be aggravated by tensing muscles.

Most progressive muscle relaxation practitioners start at the feet and work their way up to the face. For a sequence of muscle groups to follow, see the box below.

- Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes, and get comfortable.
- Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
- When you're relaxed and ready to start, shift your attention to your right foot. Take a moment to focus on the way it feels.
- Slowly tense the muscles in your right foot, squeezing as tightly as you can. Hold for a count of 10.
- Relax your right foot. Focus on the tension flowing away and the way your foot feels as it becomes limp and loose.
- Stay in this relaxed state for a moment, breathing deeply and slowly.
- When you're ready, shift your attention to your left foot. Follow the same sequence of muscle tension and release.
- Move slowly up through your body, contracting and relaxing the muscle groups as you go.
- It may take some practice at first, but try not to tense muscles other than those intended.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Sequence

The most popular sequence runs as follows:

- | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Right foot* | 1. Left thigh | 1. Right arm and hand |
| 2. Left foot | 2. Hips and buttocks | 2. Left arm and hand |
| 3. Right calf | 3. Stomach | 3. Neck and shoulders |
| 4. Left calf | 4. Chest | 4. Face |
| 5. Right thigh | 5. Back | |

* If you are left-handed you may want to begin with your left foot instead.



Relaxation technique 3: Body scan meditation for stress relief

A body scan is similar to progressive muscle relaxation except, instead of tensing and relaxing muscles, you simply focus on the sensations in each part of your body.

Practicing body scan meditation

- Lie on your back, legs uncrossed, arms relaxed at your sides, eyes open or closed. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise as you inhale and fall as you exhale. Breathe deeply for about two minutes, until you start to feel comfortable and relaxed.
- Turn your focus to the toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations you feel while continuing to also focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focused on this area for one to two minutes.
- Move your focus to the sole of your right foot. Tune in to any sensations you feel in that part of your body and imagine each breath flowing from the sole of your foot. After one or two minutes, move your focus to your right ankle and repeat. Move to your calf, knee, thigh, hip, and then repeat the sequence for your left leg. From there, move up the torso, through the lower back and abdomen, the upper back and chest, and the shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of the body that causes you pain or discomfort.
- Move your focus to the fingers on your right hand and then move up to the wrist, forearm, elbow, upper arm, and shoulder. Repeat for your left arm. Then move through the neck and throat, and finally all the regions of your face, the back of the head, and the top of the head. Pay close attention to your jaw, chin, lips, tongue, nose, cheeks, eyes, forehead, temples and scalp. When you reach the very top of your head, let your breath reach out beyond your body and imagine yourself hovering above yourself.
- After completing the body scan, relax for a while in silence and stillness, noting how your body feels. Then open your eyes slowly. Take a moment to stretch, if necessary.



Relaxation technique 4: Mindfulness for stress relief

Cultivating Mindfulness to Reduce Stress

Mindfulness is the ability to remain aware of how you're feeling right now, your "moment-to-moment" experience—both internal and external. Thinking about the past—blaming and judging yourself—or worrying about the future can often lead to a degree of stress that is overwhelming. But by staying calm and focused in the present moment, you can bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness can be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating, or meditation.

Meditations that cultivate mindfulness have long been used to reduce overwhelming stress. Some of these meditations bring you into the present by focusing your attention on a single repetitive action, such as your breathing, a few repeated words, or flickering light from a candle. Other forms of mindfulness meditation encourage you to follow and then release internal thoughts or sensations.

Practicing mindfulness meditation

Key points in mindfulness meditation are:

- **A quiet environment.** Choose a secluded place in your home, office, garden, place of worship, or in the great outdoors where you can relax without distractions or interruptions.
- **A comfortable position.** Get comfortable, but avoid lying down as this may lead to you falling asleep. Sit up with your spine straight, either in a chair or on the floor. You can also try a cross-legged or lotus position.
- **A point of focus.** This point can be internal – a feeling or imaginary scene – or something external - a flame or meaningful word or phrase that you repeat it throughout your session. You may meditate with eyes open or closed. Also choose to focus on an object in your surroundings to enhance your concentration, or alternately, you can close your eyes.
- **An observant, noncritical attitude.** Don't worry about distracting thoughts that go through your mind or about how well you're doing. If thoughts intrude during your relaxation session, don't fight them. Instead, gently turn your attention back to your point of focus.



Relaxation technique 5: Visualization meditation for stress relief

Visualization, or guided imagery, is a variation on traditional meditation that requires you to employ not only your visual sense, but also your sense of taste, touch, smell, and sound. When used as a relaxation technique, visualization involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety.

Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it's a tropical beach, a favorite childhood spot, or a quiet wooded glen. You can do this visualization exercise on your own in silence, while listening to soothing music, or with a therapist (or an audio recording of a therapist) guiding you through the imagery. To help you employ your sense of hearing you can use a sound machine or download sounds that match your chosen setting—the sound of ocean waves if you've chosen a beach, for example.

Practicing visualization

Find a quiet, relaxed place. Beginners sometimes fall asleep during a visualization meditation, so you might try sitting up or standing.

Close your eyes and let your worries drift away. Imagine your restful place. Picture it as vividly as you can—everything you can see, hear, smell, and feel. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible, using at least three of your senses. When visualizing, choose imagery that appeals to you; don't select images because someone else suggests them, or because you think they should be appealing. Let your own images come up and work for you.

If you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake, for example:

- Walk slowly around the dock and notice the colors and textures around you.
- Spend some time exploring each of your senses.
- See the sun setting over the water.
- Hear the birds singing.
- Smell the pine trees.
- Feel the cool water on your bare feet.
- Taste the fresh, clean air.

Enjoy the feeling of deep relaxation that envelopes you as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present.

Don't worry if you sometimes zone out or lose track of where you are during a guided imagery session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of stiffness or heaviness in your limbs, minor, involuntary muscle-movements, or even cough or yawn. Again, these are normal responses.



Relaxation technique 6: Yoga and tai chi for stress relief

Yoga involves a series of both moving and stationary poses, combined with deep breathing. As well as reducing anxiety and stress, yoga can also improve flexibility, strength, balance, and stamina. Practiced regularly, it can also strengthen the relaxation response in your daily life. Since injuries can happen when yoga is practiced incorrectly, it's best to learn by attending group classes, hiring a private teacher, or at least following video instructions.

What type of yoga is best for stress?

Although almost all yoga classes end in a relaxation pose, classes that emphasize slow, steady movement, deep breathing, and gentle stretching are best for stress relief.

- **Satyananda** is a traditional form of yoga. It features gentle poses, deep relaxation, and meditation, making it suitable for beginners as well as anyone primarily looking for stress reduction.
- **Hatha yoga** is also reasonably gentle way to relieve stress and is suitable for beginners. Alternately, look for labels like *gentle*, *for stress relief*, or *for beginners* when selecting a yoga class.
- **Power yoga**, with its intense poses and focus on fitness, is better suited to those looking for stimulation as well as relaxation.

If you're unsure whether a specific yoga class is appropriate for stress relief, call the studio or ask the teacher.

Tai chi

If you've ever seen a group of people in the park slowly moving in synch, you've probably witnessed tai chi. Tai chi is a self-paced, non-competitive series of slow, flowing body movements. These movements emphasize concentration, relaxation, and the conscious circulation of vital energy throughout the body. Though tai chi has its roots in martial arts, today it is primarily practiced as a way of calming the mind, conditioning the body, and reducing stress. As in meditation, tai chi practitioners focus on their breathing and keeping their attention in the present moment.

Tai chi is a safe, low-impact option for people of all ages and levels of fitness, including older adults and those recovering from injuries. Like yoga, once you've learned the basics of tai chi or qi gong, you can practice alone or with others, tailoring your sessions as you see fit.



Making relaxation techniques a part of your life

The best way to start and maintain a relaxation practice is to incorporate it into your daily routine. Between work, family, school, and other commitments, though, it can be tough for many people to find the time. Fortunately, many of the techniques can be practiced while you're doing other things.

Rhythmic exercise as a mindfulness relaxation technique

Rhythmic exercise—such as running, walking, rowing, or cycling—is most effective at relieving stress when performed with relaxation in mind. As with meditation, mindfulness requires being fully engaged in the present moment, focusing your mind on how your body feels right now. As you exercise, focus on the physicality of your body's movement and how your breathing complements that movement. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, gently return to focusing on your breathing and movement.

If walking or running, for example, focus on each step—the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the rhythm of your breath while moving, and the feeling of the wind against your face.

Tips for fitting relaxation techniques into your life

- **If possible, schedule a set time to practice each day.** Set aside one or two periods each day. You may find that it's easier to stick with your practice if you do it first thing in the morning, before other tasks and responsibilities get in the way.
- **Practice relaxation techniques while you're doing other things.** Meditate while commuting to work on a bus or train, or waiting for a dentist appointment. Try deep breathing while you're doing housework or mowing the lawn. Mindfulness walking can be done while exercising your dog, walking to your car, or climbing the stairs at work instead of using the elevator. Once you've learned techniques such as tai chi, you can practice them in your office or in the park at lunchtime.
- **If you exercise, improve the relaxation benefits by adopting mindfulness.** Instead of zoning out or staring at a TV as you exercise, try focusing your attention on your body. If you're resistance training, for example, focus on coordinating your breathing with your movements and pay attention to how your body feels as you raise and lower the weights.
- **Avoid practicing when you're sleepy.** These techniques can relax you so much that they can make you very sleepy, especially if it's close to bedtime. You will get the most benefit if you practice when you're fully awake and alert. Do not practice after eating a heavy meal or while using drugs, tobacco, or alcohol.
- **Expect ups and downs.** Don't be discouraged if you skip a few days or even a few weeks. It happens. Just get started again and slowly build up to your old momentum.

