

Relaxation Techniques for A Better Night's Sleep



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INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, relaxation has been a central focus of spiritual and cultural practices, enabling a sense of calm and connection with oneself and the surrounding world.

Only in recent decades, though, have meditative practices for relaxation become a focus of scientific research, which has come to identify key elements for fostering the relaxation response.

A quiet environment. Quiet does not have to mean completely silent. Calming sounds or music can be beneficial. Loud, abrasive sounds or noises should be avoided.

A focus of attention. A word, phrase, mantra, breathing pattern, or mental image can all be used to draw your attention and reduce thinking about external concerns.

A passive attitude. Accepting that it's normal for your mind to wander allows you to remain at-ease and draw your focus back to the object of your attention.

A comfortable position. Finding a cozy place to relax is critical. Naturally, when relaxing to fall asleep, the recommended position is lying in bed.

A comfortable mattress. Finding the best mattress for your sleep position and body type can be instrumental in a good night's rest.

All of the following methods are ways of achieving these core elements so that you can calmly fall asleep. Keeping these basics in mind empowers you to adjust these methods to suit your preferences.

Falling Asleep With Relaxation Techniques

Once you're lying comfortably in bed, try one of these techniques to put yourself at ease and settle gently into sleep.

Controlled Breathing

A series of slow, deep breaths can enable a sense of calm. This method, also known as pranayamic breathing, is believed to help reduce stress in the nervous system and may prepare the brain for sleep by reducing excitatory stimulus.

Option 1: Counting Breaths

Inhale slowly and gently through your nose.

Exhale slowly and gently through your mouth.

Count up. You can count each breath or each cycle of inhalation and exhalation, whichever comes more naturally to you.

Option 2: The 4-7-8 Method

Place the tip of your tongue near the ridge behind your front two teeth and hold it in this location throughout the breathing exercise.

With your mouth closed, slowly inhale through your nose while counting to four.

Hold your breath while counting to seven.

Open your mouth and exhale while counting to eight. Because of the location of your tongue, exhalation should cause a whooshing sound.

Repeat this 4-7-8 cycle three more times.

Controlled breathing is excellent for people just getting started with relaxation techniques or who have difficulty using other objects of focus like imagery or mantras.

Meditation and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is centered around slow, steady breathing and a non-judgmental focus on the present moment. By reducing anxiety and rumination, it has been found to have sweeping health benefits, including an ability to help reduce insomnia.

There are many variations of mindfulness meditation for different situations. One easy to use style is the body scan meditation.

Focus on slowly inhaling and exhaling at a comfortable pace.

Notice the position of your body on the bed.

Notice any sensations, good or bad, in your legs and feet. Let your legs be soft.

Continue the “body scan,” observing, from your legs up to your head, each region of your body and its sensations. The goal is to stay present and observe your body without judging or reacting and then letting each part of your body relax.

After scanning each part of your body, reflect on your body as a whole and allow it to relax.

Anyone can meditate, including with mindfulness meditation, but it can take more practice to get used to. As a result, it usually works best for people who can devote at least five minutes per day to increase their comfort with it.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) creates a calming effect by gradually tightening and releasing muscles throughout the body in conjunction with controlled breathing.

With your eyes closed, slowly breathe in and out.

Starting with your face, tense your muscles (lips, eyes, jaw) for 10 seconds, then release your muscles and breathe out for several seconds. Tense your shoulders for 10 seconds and then relax and breathe.

Continue tensing and relaxing the following body parts, skipping any area where tensing the muscles causes pain:

Shoulders
Upper arms
Lower arms and hands
Back
Stomach
Buttocks
Hamstrings
Calves
Feet

Studies have found that PMR can help people with insomnia¹², and when done carefully, may be beneficial¹³ for people who are bothered by arthritis¹⁴ or other forms of physical pain. PMR is not recommended for people with uncontrolled cardiovascular problems.

Imagery

Visualising a peaceful image from your past and all of its details engages your attention in order to promote relaxation.

With your eyes closed and in a comfortable position, think about a place or experience in your past that feels relaxing, such as a quiet natural setting.

While slowly breathing in and out, reflect on the details of this setting and how it looks.

Continue focusing on this image by adding details relating to your other senses (smell, sound, taste, touch) and experiencing the calmness of this mental imagery.

Visual thinkers who easily recall past scenes replete with details are ideally suited to using imagery as part of their bedtime relaxation.

Are There Downsides to Relaxation Techniques?

Negative consequences are rare for relaxation techniques, but a small number of people find that they can provoke anxiety. Anyone with concerns about trying these methods should talk with their doctor for specific advice before getting started.

What to Do About Mind Wandering

Even experts in meditation find that their minds can wander during these relaxation techniques, so don't worry if it happens to you. Instead, stay calm, keep breathing slowly, and try to bring your mind back to the main focus of attention.

What If I Still Can't Fall Asleep?

If you get into bed and cannot fall asleep after 20 minutes, get up, go to another part of your house, and do something soothing, such as reading or listening to quiet music.

Lying awake in bed for too long can create an unhealthy mental connection between your sleeping environment and wakefulness. Instead, you want your bed to conjure thoughts and feelings conducive to sleep.

Pre-Bedtime Tips to Help Fall Asleep Quickly

Before you actually get into bed, a few simple tips can help make sure your mind and body are prepared to fall asleep easily:

Wind down for at least half an hour before bedtime. Reading, light stretching, and other relaxing activities are ideal during this time.

Disconnect from close-range electronic devices like laptops, phones, and tablets because they can stimulate the brain and make it harder to fall asleep.

Dim the lights to help your eyes relax, and make sure you're in comfortable clothing.

Make sure your bedroom is set to a pleasant temperature. The cooler the better.

Consider a calming scent, like lavender essential oils, that can generate a calming effect.

Avoid big meals, spicy foods, caffeine, and alcohol in the lead-up to bedtime.

Big-Picture Tips to Fall Asleep Easily

Beyond the immediate run-up to bedtime, incorporating fundamental sleep tips can aid in falling asleep and prevent serious sleeping problems.

Follow a consistent sleep schedule with the same wake-up time every day, including on weekends. This helps fine-tune and retrain your internal clock for more regular sleep.

Make time for physical activity. Regular exercise benefits the body in many ways, and facilitating better sleep is one of them.

If you have a hard time sleeping, start keeping a sleep diary to identify trends that could be throwing off your nightly rest.

See a doctor. If your sleeping problems are severe, long-term, or worsening, it's important to see a doctor who can work with you to try to identify a cause and recommend optimal treatment.