

Surrey Memorial Hospital Cardiac Rehabilitation Outpatient Program

The Relaxation Response

Relaxation techniques are taught as one method to reduce the effects of the “fight or flight” response (also called the stress response). The stress response is made up of an involuntary set of physical, emotional and behavioral reactions that occur in our bodies whenever we are faced with a stressful or threatening situation. This response prepares the body to react to a real threat – to either stay and fight, or to flee the situation

In a threatening situation, our body produces and secretes the hormone adrenaline. The release of adrenaline affects the body's circulation and muscular actions causing excitement and stimulation. The blood supply to our extremities is reduced in order to increase the supply to our internal organs. Our metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension all increase. It is easy to see how this response was useful to our primitive ancestors who were faced with their own survival every day.

Today however, we are faced with very different day-to-day stressors than our primitive ancestors. Not only do we respond to serious threats in our environment, but we also respond to many unknown and ‘perceived’ threats. For example, simply recalling a frightening situation or worrying about an upcoming event is enough to trigger the fight or flight response. Although the stress response is useful (and necessary) in times of emergency, many stressors of modern living elicit the stress response at times when it is inappropriate for us to run or fight.

Our bodies are unable to distinguish the difference between a serious threat and a perceived threat, so the same physiological reaction occurs. You may find that as a result of this response, you have stomach upset, tension headaches, or on-going muscle tension and fatigue. Researchers have concluded that the long-term effects of the stress response may contribute to permanent harmful physiological and emotional changes.

GOOD NEWS! There is a counterbalancing mechanism for the stress response – it's called the relaxation response. The relaxation response is also a reaction that is produced within our bodies to offset those of the fight or flight response. It produces an opposite reaction to the stress response: metabolism, heart rate, blood pressure, breathing and muscle tension all decrease. One way to reduce the stress response and to initiate the relaxation response is to practice relaxation techniques. Each of the relaxation techniques have the potential to produce the relaxation response. The key is to find the one that produces the desired effect for you.

GUIDELINES FOR YOUR RELAXATION SESSION

1. **Pick a time to practice that is right for you.** Some people prefer to practice in the morning because of the positive effect it has on the rest of their day. Choose a time to practice when you are not sleepy, as the point of relaxation practice is to relax and be rejuvenated, rather than to sleep.
2. **Eliminate Distractions.** Choose a place that is quiet and relatively free of distractions. For example, if you are at home, turn the phone off; choose a time when the children are out of the house, etc. Try to avoid practicing when you are hungry, or just after you have eaten a big meal; your body will be more focused on these natural sensations than on relaxing.
3. **Get Comfortable.** Most relaxation techniques take 20-30 minutes to complete. Choose a position that will be comfortable for you to maintain for this length of time. The optimal position is lying on your back on a flat surface with a pillow under your knees and under your head. You may also choose to sit in a chair. If this is your choice, try to keep your back straight. Regardless of the position you choose, leave your arms and legs un-crossed.
4. **Breathing.** Proper breathing is essential because it supplies your body with oxygen which is essential to revitalize tissues and muscles. During relaxation, you should take slow, deep, regular breaths; in through the nose and out through the mouth.
5. **Try Different Techniques.** Everyone has different preferences when it comes to relaxation techniques – find the one that fits right for you. There are many options – you may want to memorize the technique and repeat it softly to yourself – you may prefer to use this relaxation tape or other commercially available ones where a voice guides you through the relaxation technique – or you may also prefer to make your own tape by recording yourself reading a relaxation script (some people find this less distracting than listening to someone else's voice).
6. **It Takes Practice and Commitment.** Set aside 30 minutes to relax each day and commit yourself to it!
7. **Be Gentle With Yourself.** Do not worry about how well you are doing. If you find that your mind is racing with other distracting thoughts, gently direct your mind back to the exercise, or simply focus on your breathing. If distracting thoughts are an ongoing problem when practicing relaxation, try a few techniques until you find one that helps you to remain focused.