

Relaxation Strategies

What you will learn

1. What stress is
2. How your body responds to stress
3. Three relaxation strategies
 - Paced breathing
 - Progressive muscle relaxation
 - Special place visual imagery

What is stress?



- Stress is a normal part of life.
- Living with a chronic headache disease can be very stressful.
- Stress can impact your body and mind and make your headache symptoms worse.

How Does My Body Respond to Stress?



- The autonomic nervous system controls processes in your body that you usually do not think about (e.g., breathing, digestion, sweating).
- It is made up of two parts - one that controls your stress response (sympathetic nervous system) and the other that controls your relaxation response (the parasympathetic nervous system).
- When you are stressed, feel angry, or anxious your **stress response** is active. Many things in life including headache pain can activate this response.
- Lots of changes happen in your body to help you prepare for action (“fight, flight, or freeze”) (1) Heart rate and blood pressure speed up (2) faster breathing (3) increase in blood sugar and fat.
- When you activate our **relaxation response** the opposite changes happen in the body to prepare your body for rest and relaxation (1) Heart rate slows down (2) slower breathing.
- While we cannot always control our stress and relaxation response, we can influence them. By learning what tools activate your relaxation response you can influence your headache symptoms.

Setting Yourself Up for Success!

After practicing each relaxation strategy, think about the following questions:

1. Did you notice the difference between a tense muscle and a relaxed one?
2. How did your body feel at the end of the practice?
3. What emotions did you experience during the exercise?
4. What thoughts did you notice come in your mind?

Paced Breathing



- Involves engaging the diaphragm, a dome-shaped muscle under the rib cage, which helps us to take slow, regular, and paced breaths
- Helps keep the system calm and reduce how often you get a headache
- Activates your relaxation response
- Reduces your muscle tension
- Decreases your heart rate and blood pressure
- Improves your mood
- Helps you become aware of what you are thinking and feeling

Setting Yourself Up for Success!

1. Find a time and comfortable place to practice where others will not disturb you
2. Sit in a comfortable chair and allow your body to be supported
3. When you breathe out, say a phrase such as "I am relaxed"
4. Be consistent – when you first learn this still practice at the same time every day (e.g., after brushing your teeth, before breakfast)
5. Practice, practice, practice!
6. When you get better using your skills you can start to practice them in other settings like at work or out in the community

Progressive Muscle Relaxation



- Most people do not realize they are holding tension in their body until they feel pain
- You might not even recognize what being relaxed feels like
- Progressive muscle relaxation can help you
 - » Activate your relaxation response
 - » Feel a state of deep relaxation by tensing and relaxing the muscles in your body
 - » Learn to tell the difference between feelings of tension and relaxation

Setting Yourself Up for Success!

1. Find a time and comfortable place to practice where you can minimize interruptions
2. Sit in a comfortable chair and allow your body to be supported
3. Lightly tense one muscle group for 5-7 seconds
4. Focus on what you feel as the muscles tense and relax
5. Enjoy how it feels when your muscles relax
6. The more you practice the quicker and easier it will be for you to activate your relaxation response, so keep at it

Visual Imagery



- Distracts you from your headache pain
- Relieves stress, tension, and physical discomfort
- Decreases headache frequency
- Improves your mood
- Brings harmony between your mind and body

Setting Yourself Up for Success!

1. Use your visual imagery log to identify and explore your “special place”
2. Notice any sensations in your body
3. Use your paced breathing during your visualization
4. Use all five senses - take note of what you hear, see, smell, touch, and taste
5. Set a timer for the length of time you want to practice so that you can focus on your special place rather than on how long you have left to practice
6. Let any thoughts or emotions that arise pass by
7. Remember, this is YOUR special place—return whenever you need to

Imagery Log

My **special place** is: _____

I can **see**: _____

I can **smell**: _____

I can **hear**: _____

I can **feel**: _____

I can **taste**: _____

Other **feelings** or **thoughts**: _____

Relaxation Practice Log

Steps to complete your relaxation practice log:

1. Goal: I will practice _____ for ___ minutes ___ times per day by _____
2. Rate your level of relaxation before and after you practice using the scale below
3. Record the total time you practiced
4. Reflect on your practice - note any thoughts or emotions you experienced, any preferences for the time of day you practice, and any barriers to practice

Rating Scale

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not Relaxed  Very Relaxed

Day/Date	Relaxation Rating Before practice (0-10)	Relaxation Rating After practice (0-10)	Total Practice Time (minutes)	Type of Relaxation Skill	Notes