

Relaxation theory: theory and practices



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Relaxation Therapy is a program which emphasizes a wide variety of strategies and techniques for dealing with stress and health disorders.

Relaxation techniques can benefit almost any person by reducing stress and tension in muscles, lowering blood pressure and heart rate, and creating internal coping skills to handle anxiety.

Muscle relaxation therapy involves learning how stressful circumstances can cause the body's nervous system to activate. When some type of emotional or physical stimulation connected with stress occurs, this system will kick into action. The result is that the heart begins to beat faster, breathing becomes more rapid, and blood vessels around the body begin to dilate. While a reaction of this type is beneficial when there is a need to defend the body from some type of adversary, most of the time stress has a negative effect on the mental, physical, and emotional state of a person (Klimes, 2010).

By employing relaxation therapy, it is possible to begin reversing the stimulation to the nervous system and restore the body and mind to a more balanced state. The key to the therapy is consciously regulating the breathing. This means becoming aware of the current rate of the inhalation and exhalation phases of the breathing process and making a conscious effort to incrementally slow them down to a more acceptable pace. As the individual is able to slow the breathing rate, this also has a calming effect on rapid heartbeat and other physiological processes. It has been proven that when an individual learns how to self-initiate the relaxation response some of the negative effects of chronic stress may be counter-balanced (Ost, 1987).

There are many different approaches used to achieve a relaxed state. In the early stages of learning to relax, it can be difficult for the person to become fully relaxed. A long or deep relaxation method is more effective to induce a relaxation response. Some of these deep methods include autogenic training, cue-controlled deep muscle relaxation (CC DMR), progressive muscle relaxation (PMR), and meditation. The Jacobson Method of progressive muscle relaxation involves flexing specific muscles, holding that position, and then relaxing the muscles. This technique often involves progressing through the muscle groups of the body one at a time, beginning with the feet, spending approximately one minute on each area. Progressive relaxation may be practiced while lying down or sitting. This approach has been suggested for pain relief, to ease physical tension, to relieve anxiety, and to overcome psychosomatic disorders (Jacobson, 1987). Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is said to require several months of practice at least three times per week in order to be able to evoke the relaxation response quickly in a time of crisis.

Some forms of relaxation exercises are shorter and do not require daily time commitment that many people find too demanding. These brief methods include self-control relaxation, paced respiration, and deep breathing. Brief methods generally require less time and often represent an abbreviated form of a deep method. The Laura Mitchell Simple Relaxation approach involves reciprocal relaxation or moving one part of the body in the opposite direction from an area of tension, and then letting it go. Applied relaxation involves imagination of relaxing situations with the intention of inducing muscular and mental relaxation (Ost, 1987).

Relaxation therapy may include other elements along with the controlled breathing. Seeking a quiet spot to begin the process can also help expedite the achievement of a calm state. For some people the use of aromatherapy in conjunction with relaxation therapy techniques is also helpful. Music or relaxation tapes of nature sounds like a waterfall may also help enhance the effect of the therapy. Other common relaxation techniques include guided imagery, deep breathing, passive muscle relaxation, and refocusing.

Because there is no formal credentials required for relaxation therapy, relaxation techniques may be taught by almost anyone. Among those who employ these techniques are medical practitioners, physicians, psychotherapists, hypnotherapists, nurses, clinical psychologists, and sports therapists (Lang & Stein, 2001).

Clinical studies suggest that relaxation techniques may be beneficial in patients with generalized anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, social phobias, or panic disorders, although these approaches do not appear to be as effective as psychotherapy. Many of the studies show that relaxations techniques were more effective when used in conjunction with cognitive or behavioral therapy techniques (Ost L., 2000). Relaxation has also shown some effectiveness in treating individuals with anger, hostility, and aggressive behavior. It is not clear if effects of relaxation therapy are long-term. If a person stops practicing the deep-breathing exercises, the symptoms of stress may return. While relaxation techniques may be used for conditions related to stress management, there is not enough evidence to form firm conclusions about the effectiveness of relaxation for other, more severe mental conditions (Ost L., 2000).

In the medical arena, relaxation has been suggested in patients after surgery to speed up recovery, require less pain medication, lower blood pressure, and reduce postoperative complications. Relaxation techniques are sometimes used by people with insomnia or other sleep disorders. Other medical disorders that are positively improved with relaxation therapy are tension headaches, Fibromyalgia, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, Asthma, and Diabetes (Lang & Stein, 2001). Relaxation can help individuals cope with stress management, proper blood circulation, and body pains. It also helps to calm the nervous system, to direct energy flows, and to interpret behavioral changes.

Most relaxation techniques are non-invasive and are generally considered safe in healthy adults. Serious adverse effects have not been reported. It is theorized that anxiety may actually be increased in some individuals using relaxation techniques and that sudden, unexpected emotional experiences including pain, heart palpitations, muscle twitching, crying spells, or increased blood pressure may occur rarely. People with psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia or psychosis should avoid relaxation techniques unless recommended by their primary psychiatric healthcare provider. It is suggested by practitioners that techniques requiring inward focusing may intensify depressed mood in some people, although research and scientific evidence is limited in this area (Lang & Stein, 2001).

Relaxation therapy is not recommended as the sole treatment approach for potentially serious medical conditions, and it should not delay the diagnosis of the condition or treatment with more proven techniques. If the person is only experiencing stress and anxiety without any other mental condition,

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then they could benefit from learning relaxation techniques. For a person with mental illness it is not a stand-alone mode of therapy, but rather a beneficial treatment to be used with other forms of therapy.

In the high school setting, most of students will be normally functioning adolescents. With the increased standards and testing present in schools, even average students experience stress and anxiety during the course of the school day. Many studies have been done on the effects of relaxation therapy on children and adolescents. The results of one such survey are that the calming effects are short-term (Tatum, 2006). In other words, if I want to teach Progressive Relaxation to a group of students experiencing test anxiety in order to give them the focus and confidence to tackle the state benchmark exam, I would need to do so in the weeks preceding the test. Another prevalent condition in children that has seen proven benefits from relaxation techniques is that of hyperactivity or Attention Deficit Disorder. With a brief relaxation method used daily, these students showed marked improvement in their ability to remain calm and focused in the classroom (Klien-Hessling & Lohaus, 2002).

Often, in the midst of a stressful situation, it is difficult to relax. Sometimes doing something simple like, sitting in a comfortable chair, listening to soothing music, or taking a warm bath is enough to help a person to unwind. In other instances the levels of anxiety and tension may be so overwhelming that a person may have to turn to a professional for help. Whether a person's stress is spiraling out of control or they have already got it tamed, learning one of the various relaxation techniques can be beneficial. When practiced regularly, these activities lead to a reduction in everyday stress levels and a

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boost in feelings of joy and serenity. What's more, they also serve a protective quality by teaching you how to stay calm and collected in the face of life's curveballs.

Since stress is a part of many people's lives today and since there are different ways to treat stress, it is helpful to study various methods in order to help them with stress reduction. A study of relaxation therapy not only can teach models of relaxation but also can teach several relaxation exercises which can be useful in helping patients relax. Coping techniques of relaxation therapy can benefit people in many situations, and it is imperative that the counselor has knowledge of them and also realizes that an ongoing study of relaxation techniques can be beneficial to a successful practice. This study has shown benefits that would help anyone in the stress-filled world in which we live today.