

## Introduction – How do you know if you are tense?

1. Strangely, can be so habitually tense that almost without realizing we gradually become accustomed to the sensations of living in a tense state. Becomes “normal”.
2. Fight, Flight, Freeze – survival techniques with perceived threats to life or safety.
3. Sometimes get use to being in the “protect” mode and stay in high gear. Long term effects of this (ex. weak organ theory).
4. Some clues to help spot undue tension levels:
  - a. tense muscles
  - b. heart racing or pounding
  - c. hyperventilating; feeling light-headed or faint
  - d. persistent tiredness or exhaustion
  - e. aches and pains
  - f. difficulty with sleeping or gritting your teeth at night
  - g. waking up tired
  - h. loss of appetite or not eating well, perhaps with stomach “in knots”
  - i. developing minor ailments such as headaches, migraines or stomach upsets
  - j. mind in a whirl; can’t think straight, concentrate or work effectively
  - k. sense of rush, urgency, pressure
  - l. lack of time.
5. These symptoms can, also, be caused by other medical problems. If unsure, check it out.
6. While some tension can help in the short-term by alerting us or motivating us, in long term can begin to cause problems with our health. In time our work and relationships likely begin to suffer.
7. Generally, the more relaxed you are, the better your mind works and the more capable and adaptable you can be.
8. Many approaches to learn to relax – no one is right for everyone. Some methods are: learning to relax muscle groups, mental relaxation, meditation, yoga, prayer, biofeedback and more. With the mind/body connection it is possible to use any of the approaches we discuss here today to benefit our entire being.
9. Learning to relax takes time and practice in order for you to become proficient.
10. Simple relaxation can be used about anywhere – sitting in a lecture or exam, walking down the street, or going to sleep in bed.

## Body

### I. How it works

- A. When people first tense up and then relax muscle groups they end up more relaxed than when they began. (Ex. A natural process: stretch and yawn). In the process the key is two factors:
1. That we learn the difference in the sensations of being tense and being relaxed, AND
  2. That it gives signals to the subconscious and “automatic” parts of our system (the autonomic nervous system) that “all is well”, “there is no need to be tense any longer” and your autonomic nervous system responds by slowing down your heart rate, stopping the release of adrenaline into your blood stream, etc. (things which we do not normally have under our conscious control).
3. Hence, the exercises themselves are deceptively simple. Don’t be fooled – they DO work, but it takes time and practice for this to be used in real-life stressful situations.

### II. The Method – For each of the areas of the body described, tense up and then relax muscle groups. Do each exercise three times. As you get better at relaxing these areas, try using less tension before relaxing.

- A. Hands – Commonly one of the first body parts to show tension (clench fist, hold tight to something, or clasp each other).
1. Stretch out your hands so your fingers are straight and spread out.
  2. Hold this position for a moment and feel the tension across your palms and the back of your hands.
  3. Then, let your hands relax and flop beside you, or onto your lap.
  4. Resist the urge to hold onto something. Just let them hang loosely beside you or rest on your lap.
  5. When hands are relaxed, fingers are gently curved, neither tightly curled nor straight, and are “floppy”, not stiff.
- B. Shoulders – When tense our shoulders are commonly raised i.e. hunched.
1. Pull your shoulders down
  2. Feel the tension under your arms and up your neck.
  3. Hold that position for a moment.
  4. Relax them and return to a natural position (i.e. not hunched).
- C. Head and Neck – neck muscles can only relax when they don’t have to support the weight of the head
1. We tend to spend a lot of time looking down (keyboarding, reading, writing, etc).
  2. Instead, try looking right up and feel the tension in your neck.

3. Slowly, roll the head first to the left in a circular motion and then to the right in a circular motion.
  4. All your head to return to the straight ahead, balanced position.
- D. **Face** – Many face muscles (for speaking, eating, facial expression). This is one of the first areas to show tension. (NOTE: do not do this exercise if you are wearing dentures or contacts).
1. Let all expression go from your face: let your forehead become smooth, your jaw sag with your teeth just apart (though your lips may still be closed), your eyes looking straight ahead and into the distance and not squinting.
  2. It may help you to do this if you think of a word like “vacant” “relaxed”. Put the expression on your face that matches this word.

III. **Breathing** – when tense, breathing tends to become faster and more shallow.

- A. Allow yourself to breath from LOWER DOWN in you abdomen (not more air, but a little air from deep down).
- B. Let it become gentle, easy and regular.
- C. Now, breath in to capacity and then MORE. Hold it and release when instructed.
- D. Release air fully and then MORE. Hold it and breath back in when instructed.

IV. **Relaxing Thoughts** – Method just reviewed doesn’t aim for mental relaxation, but can help too. It is not possible to be really relaxed physically while being tense mentally, or vice versa. Some techniques to help with mental relaxation.

- A. Remove mind from stressful and focus on something pleasant (a form of daydreaming turned to your advantage).
  1. Imagine somewhere, real or imaginary, that you would like to be and where you can relax and put aside cares of the world for a little while – a safe place.
  2. Gradually begin to imagine the details of this place, the sights, sounds, smells.
  3. Imagine yourself “unwinding” and “recharging your batteries”.
  4. Then gradually return to your current world and bring the new found feelings of life and energy back with you into the present..
  5. Merely imagining pleasant places is how we shift energy and bring the relaxation BACK to the present circumstances. Not intended to become an avoidance of the present circumstances.

- B. Thinking about something stressful while practicing physical relaxation
  - 1. Taking the same situation in A above, once you are physically relaxed, try to imagine yourself in a situation you feel tense about and then focus again on relaxing.
  - 2. Alternate your attention between the tense situation and relaxation until you can remain relaxed while thinking about this situation.
  - 3. This is mental rehearsal for upcoming stressful events.
  - 4. For example, to prepare for upcoming exam, first relax physically, then imagine yourself reviewing for the exam.
  - 5. When you can do this and still remain relaxed, begin to introduce thoughts about the day before the exam while remaining relaxed.
  - 6. Then, think about GOING to the exam and remaining relaxed.
  - 7. Then imagine yourself DOING the exam while remaining relaxed.

## **V. Relaxation and Sleep**

- A. Relaxing is not the same as sleep. Many people sleep without being very relaxed.
- B. Learning to relax can help one get to sleep more easily and when asleep experience more restfulness.
- C. Use the previous suggestions about relaxing the body and mind.
- D. Some additional suggestions:
  - 1. Bed is for sleeping and sex only. Do not use your bed as a place to work during the day
  - 2. Relax just before going to bed. Stop working "just before" you want to sleep.
  - 3. Put workbooks, television, etc. out of sight of your bed
  - 4. Develop a routine prior to going to bed
  - 5. Once in bed, get as comfortable as possible – relaxing the body and mind as instructed previously.
  - 6. Do a full body check for relaxation starting slowly with the toes and slowly working up the body. Focus on relaxation and relax those parts.
  - 7. Yawn – artificial yawns are just as good as the real thing in helping you to slow down your breathing and releasing fluid between your eyelids which will enable them to stay closed all night.

## **VI. Stop Thinking Altogether**

- A. To quiet all thoughts and leave an empty mind is very difficult. If thoughts are going round and round in your mind as you attempt to sleep, try this:

1. Use the physical relaxation techniques above.
2. With eyes closed, look straight ahead and “stare into space” letting the eyes defocus. Center on a distant unmoving spot and stare.
3. If your thoughts don’t stop, try focusing on your breathing and gently slowing it down.
4. Imagine your thoughts as images on a black screen and slowly erase.

## **VII. Summation - Build Relaxation into Everyday Life**

- A. For real use, build these into everyday life so when very stressful things come along, you are ready through regular practice to apply relaxation skills in the midst of difficulty.
- B. By applying, you will become more aware of any signs of tension in your body and alert to early warning signs in your body that tell you to relax before tension becomes a major problem.
- C. You may reach the point that you do not have to tense muscle groups prior to relaxing them – the tensing stage is not actually necessary, but was introduced as an easier way for beginners to learn to listen to their bodies.
- D. You cannot overdose on these exercises nor do they harm you or become addictive. They simply make good use of natural processes.